Love Is Enough



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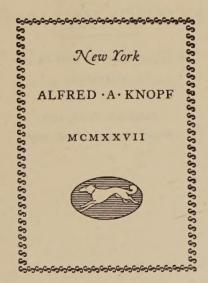
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VOLUME ONE



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THE COUNTESS BEAUCHAMP because of her love for Worcestershire, and mine for Madresfield



Cove is enough: ho ye who seek saving,

Go no further; come hither; these have been who

have found it,

And these know the House of Fulfilment of Craving;

These know the Cup with the roses around it;

These know the World's Wound and the balm that hath bound it:

Cry out, the World heedeth not, "Love lead us home!"

-WILLIAM MORRIS



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BOOK ONE CLARE LYDIATT



I

PEN HOUSE

HALF a mile above the village of Wychbury the convex windows in the lower storey of Pen House returned the lurid reflex of a sun sinking to extinction among the mountains of Wales, and surveyed, with the dispassionate indolence of age, the darkening expanses of the Severn Plain four hundred feet below. In front of them, screening the precipitous foreground, inviting, as it were, the perpetual contemplation of sombre distances, lay the shrubberies which Dr. Weir had planted in the days of youth and activity many years before. In house and garden alike the only shapes that suggested vigour or aspiration were two gigantic Wellingtonias, whose tall pyramids stood etched in immobility against the sunset. These also the doctor had planted in the first year of his ownership and the last of the Crimean war. Sometimes, on sunny evenings, the old man would stand rapt in admiration of these two prodigious children of his fancy: and more rarely, when he ventured out with Jabez in the old victoria, he would slew round his thin shoulders to see, from a distance, their twin spires dominating the low-browed stucco façade of the little Georgian house in whose shadow he had planted them.

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It was an old man's house, and the spirit of one old man inhabited and informed it. Dr. Weir was now in his seventy-eighth year. For more than forty he had lived at Pen House, and, but for the incalculable accidents of age, seemed likely to go on living there for many years to come, so warily, and with such meticulous moderation his present mode of life was planned; so jealously was he guarded from all adversity by the attentions of his daughter Catherine and the devotion of Mrs. Rudge.

In fifty odd years of practice he had gathered to himself the reputation and respect that old age, of itself, acquires; his great gaunt height, his magnificent eyes, which seemed to penetrate no less deeply as the fire within them failed, his ruthless common sense had impressed his own generation and gained the reinforcement of tradition in the two that followed it. A hard man, whose hardness was often tempered by sudden surprising kindliness; a just man, whose judgments rose above the prejudice of the local bench; a skilled physician, unorthodox but weighty with experience; a sceptic, illuminated by mystical intuitions: a wealthy man, but generous, and one whose riches nobody envied.

In his seventy-second year the doctor had retired from the active practice of medicine; but no idle retirement could satisfy his zest for living. From those high terraces, like an old eagle, he still contemplated the life that he had been forced to abandon; nothing that happened in the village of Wychbury escaped his attention; and the village itself was conscious of his scrutiny, his very aloofness creating a legend of supernatural knowledge and power. For a long time his old patients persisted in climbing the hill and pestering him for advice that his agreement with his successor, young Dr. Boyd, would not allow him to give. Catherine stood guard over him and turned them all away; all except George Vigors, the sexton, for whom, in spite of his clerical associations, the doctor always had a weak spot.

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"It's as well to keep in with George," he said grimly. "You never know when I may not want him to bury me."

In spite of these prognostications he still clung obstinately to his office as chairman of the bench. Each Thursday morning the old victoria took him down to Wychbury, his lean legs cramped to a conventional attitude, his dark eyes devouring every detail on the roadway as he passed. Not even Sir Joseph Hingston, with his challenging crest and the new magnificence of Stourford Castle behind him, commanded such veneration. And then, one day, at the end of a weary licensing session, the court-room swam in front of him, the strength faded away from his limbs, a black pall descended, and he awoke to find himself dazed and weak in the arms of the magistrate's clerk.

"It's heart," he told himself. "The heart muscle's good for so many pulsations and no more. It's no good flogging a tired horse. I must give in."

His daughter tried to force him to a consultation. Why shouldn't his old friend, Lloyd Moore, run over from North Bromwich and see him in a friendly way?

"Lloyd Moore?" he snorted. "I know Lloyd Moore, and he knows me. Lloyd Moore was once my dresser. Now his time's worth six guineas an hour, and I'm not going to rob him of half a day to tell me something that I know better than he does. Besides, he's a surgeon, and mine is a medical case. Still, he's in a position to sign my death certificate, if that's what you're after."

She wasn't after that. The harshness of the suggestion made her cry. He took her hand and pressed it. The gesture was unusual. He had never shown himself so tender to her as to Sylvia, who had gone and married that rascal Lydiatt; but, for all that, Catherine was a good girl who might show more sense

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when she came to years of discretion. At that time she was only thirty-two.

"I tell you," he went on, "there's nothing to worry about. I'm going to take care of myself, and you'll have to help me. See?"

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. The denial of this last means of self-expression made him restless and occasionally fretful; the proposal that she might help him was a mere form of words. He had always prided himself on his independence; and though, professionally, he knew women better than most men, he had very little understanding or use for them in domestic relations; for he had married in middle age and lost his wife within five years of their marriage, leaving his two daughters to the care of Mrs. Rudge, and treating them with the alterations of roughness and intimacy, unexpected and therefore embarrassing, which had endeared him to his women patients. It was clear, as Catherine found to her cost, that the whole nature of a relation which had lasted for over thirty years could not suddenly be changed. A habit, so fixed as to be superior to circumstance, forced him to resent the attentions that he invited. His irritability made her dread the sudden harsh judgments and humiliations that she daily suffered at his hands. Mrs. Rudge, providentially, was blessed with a thicker skin.

In those early years of the doctor's retirement Catherine Weir knew little happiness; only the strength and obstinacy that she had inherited from the old man himself could have sustained her through them; for her life, apart from one tragic incident in the early twenties, still passionately remembered, had been barren of beauty or emotional experience. It is true that the childhood of Claerwen, her niece, had absorbed her; but mingled with the vicarious maternal tenderness that Clare awakened in her, ran a deeper strain which, struggle as she might, she could

not conceal or suppress. For Clare was the daughter of her sister Sylvia, and all of Sylvia that showed itself in the growing Clare renewed the pain of a wrong she could never forget.

It recalled to her the memory of Clare's father, Ambrose Lydiatt. Lydiatt was a musician, organist of the parish church at Stourton. He came to Pen House to give piano and singing lessons to the doctor's young ladies; but in his worn leather portfolio, like some new Prometheus, he had carried into their almost monastic seclusion something more than music. Twice a week the sisters took their lessons in turn at the old Broadwood, faced with pleatings of maroon silk, which still stood in the drawing-room at Pen House. There Catherine Weir had lost her heart. It was natural enough that Lydiatt should make love to her in circumstances so intimate and in a scene so obviously set for passion; it was natural that a creature so young and generous should be thrilled by this adventure; it was prudent, in view of the doctor's known and violent prejudices, that their love-making should remain secret, sweeter for its secrecy and for the subdued and luscious tenderness of Schumann's music that enveloped it.

In the ecstatic humility of the Frauenlieben und Leben, freely and mawkishly translated, Catherine's devotion found its liturgy. Not even Sylvia her sister must know. She and Sylvia sang Mendelssohn duets, with words that for her and Lydiatt had meanings that poor Sylvia couldn't guess. Nor did she guess that, with an equal enthusiasm, Lydiatt was making love to Sylvia.

For many months the double intrigue went on. Lydiatt, it seemed, found it easier to make love than to make up his mind; for though Catherine undoubtedly possessed more absolute beauty, Sylvia was younger, more pliable and infinitely more sensitive. Not till the very day of her sister's elopement did

Catherine dream for a moment that Lydiatt was not wholly hers. It came, and her life was broken. It withered away like a bough of lilac broken in full flower, and her beauty withered with it. She grew bitter with a desolation that found its only comfort in her father's anger; for the doctor was old-fashioned in his ideas of filial duty and exaggerated the contempt of the scientist for those who practised the arts without material success. All the fervour of her love found new expression in an inclusive hatred for Lydiatt, for her sister and for the human race; a hatred so persistent that when, a few years later, Sylvia died in the poverty that she had chosen and Catherine had escaped, and Lydiatt, emigrating to Canada with a new wife, had left to their mercy this child with the fantastic name, she could not look on it as anything but a reminder of her own humiliation. Not even the helplessness of the small creature touched her heart.

All this was many years ago, and with the passage of time, made swifter by the endless monotony of life at Pen House, her attitude towards Clare changed. From the first day of its arrival Mrs. Rudge took the child to her heart. Catherine watched her jealously, and from a distance, learning, against her will, the barrenness of a life devoid of love. Within a few years she had begun to be interested in Clare, to envy the devotion which Thirza Rudge, without effort, inspired. So she crept nearer. She loved Clare hungrily, passionately, yet always, to her grief, with an awkwardness, an obstinate spiritual inhibition. that the child's instinct infallibly divined. She couldn't help it. Always, even in the moments of her most passionate will to love, the image of Sylvia, which year by year defined itself more clearly in Clare's features and tricks of expression, rose between them like a barrier transparent but impassable, denying all completeness of confidence.

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Then, with the doctor's breakdown, came the care of another child, one more wilful and obstinate than Clare could ever be, and in the absorption of this new charge, the raw wound healed. Yet, in the scar, as in old wounds that itch and burn with changes of wind and temperature, there remained a focus of potential pain, ready to be stirred into activity by agencies unsuspected and unforeseen.

Another and a greater anxiety arose. In the third year of his retirement the doctor had a stroke; a small affair it seemed at first, no more than a sudden numbness and loss of power in the left leg. Lloyd Moore came out from North Bromwich to confirm the verdict that the old man already had delivered. For a few weeks his ancient obstinacy asserted itself in a painful renewal of energy. He persisted in pacing his terrace with a stick, dragging the weight of the dead limb behind him. To and fro he went along the level ground, seeing nothing of the flowers in which he delighted or the wide prospect of the plain, his face lined, concentrated, as though he hoped that by sheer force of will he could drive the power of his determination into the degenerate nerves.

Catherine watched him in an agony; for she really loved him, and particularly that part of him which compelled him to this martyrdom. At times, standing behind the lace curtains of the drawing-room window, she could almost feel in her own limbs the fierce effort of his will, forcing life into blind channels that would no longer contain it. At last he gave in. He knew, as well as she did, that this was the beginning of the end. He had told her as much in his harsh, challenging way: "This is the first. Some day there'll come a second. And the third will do for me!" The time for joking about death certificates had passed. At any moment the second blow might fall, and then the next, and then . . . She dared not think of it.

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Only she knew that, with the first dimming of that central fire, a curious gentleness was born in him that made him more lovable. All through those years of suspension that marked Clare's adolescence his nature was taking on a mellow patina, through which the brightness of the original metal gleamed, on occasion, with a hard and devastating brilliance; but, for the most part, he had grown submissive to his fate and to the attentions of his two nurses. To those of Thirza in particular; for Thirza was now an old woman, only ten years younger than himself, and, like himself, admitted to the pains and privileges of age. It was she who trimmed his beard for him: an operation that, even in his most submissive moments, Catherine would never have dared to undertake.

Gradually he settled down into a routine of artificial peace. His old study, adjoining the dining-room, was converted into a bedroom; a little chamber of the barest simplicity with no furniture but his bed, a few books, his dressing-table, an articulated skeleton, and a single armchair; the whole impregnated by a faint odour of carbolic acid, the old-fashioned antiseptic to which, since the days of Lister, he had given his faith. From this room he issued every morning at ten precisely, leaning on Thirza's arm. In summer his chair was placed beside the open window of the dining-room facing his Wellingtonias; in winter at the fireside. There he would sit all day, reading or dozing for hours on end, only moving to take his seat at the head of the table at meal-times and to wind up the clock in the hall on Sunday mornings. Little by little his rugged face became softened to a curious unsubstantial whiteness, so frail that it seemed as if the least shock might shatter it.

And yet his mind was clear, as clear, in most ways, as ever before, with a still, sunset clarity. The absence of a future, or rather the sense of its calculable definition, turned his thoughts

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backward into unusual channels. He began to read history with an almost youthful eagerness, as though he had suddenly attained the wisdom of a new perspective. With equal enthusiasm he returned to the writings of Comte and the religious sceptics who had most deeply influenced his youth, violently reaffirming his distrust in all religious systems, satisfying himself, again and again, of the rightness which had set him in opposition to the vicar, Mr. Pomfret, and all his tribe. With politics he had finished for ever; he had no faith in politicians. Even Gladstone had failed him, not only by the establishment of a Catholic Maynooth, but by the enormity of conferring a peerage on that scribbler Tennyson.

One other thing, surprisingly, absorbed his interest. Money. And this was strange; for in all his active life he had scarcely given it a thought. Perhaps he had always been too busy; but now that he had leisure to survey his possessions he found that, almost insensibly, he had become a wealthy man; wealthy, at least, for his own modest station in life. His own needs had been infinitesimal, the demands on his small family never exacting; and since the day, more than forty years ago, when he had bought Pen House, he had never been forced to any capital expenditure. In that half century his original possessions had more than quadrupled in value; and the steady stream of his earnings had deposited a delta of rich alluvium which it amazed him to contemplate. Unconsciously a strain of carefulness, almost of avarice, asserted itself. To his daughter's astonishment, he began, for the first time in his life, to preach economy and to complain of extravagance; to read financial journals and watch the markets; to find an endless fascination in the casting and recasting of his will, a document which he always kept in a drawer of the dining-room bureau within reach of his left hand.

It was by reason of this new development that Dudley

Wilburn had lately become a frequent visitor of Pen House. Wilburn was junior partner in the old firm of Wilburn and Wilburn, the most reputable solicitors of North Bromwich. In earlier days the doctor had been contented with the services of the lawyer in Wychbury who practised in the court over which he presided and on rare occasions collected his debts; but Mr. Mayhew, he feared, was hardly competent to deal with graver matters; and Wilburn, when he presented himself at Pen House for the first time, turned out to be an old acquaintance, whom they had all known as a boy. A fellow with all his wits about him, the doctor soon decided; and, though he disliked the intrusion of the magnificent Hingstons into his own corner of the county, what was good enough for the Hingstons was good enough for him. He respected the air of clean strength, the keen, calculated soberness that Wilburn carried with him. He approved the way in which Wilburn kept his end up in their many subjects of disagreement; he liked his tact, his kindness, his diffidence; he liked the man himself: and so did Catherine.

For, with the arrival of Wilburn, the first man of her own—or nearly her own—generation with whom she had been brought into intimate contact since the days of Lydiatt, Catherine Weir experienced a curious rejuvenation. He filled her consciousness with airs of a world outside Pen House, the very existence of which she had taught herself to disregard. He brought with him the breath of life which she had consciously, and, later, half-unconsciously, denied herself. He flattered her, from the first, by accepting her as coequal and coeval, in a category definitely removed from that of the old man and the old serving maid with whose life she had identified herself. His coming roused her from the fatalistic resignation which she had gradually accepted; it suggested to her that, perhaps, her life

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was not quite finished. Her body, her mind, awakened to a new and surprising sensibility that responded eagerly to the stimulus of physical contacts and whispered confidences. She saw that Wilburn and herself were partners in a kind of benevolent conspiracy, with pass-words and understandings and secrets that nobody else understood; and in this partnership he deferred to her wisdom more completely than he ever deferred to the wisdom of her father.

But that was not enough for her. She discovered that in spirit, at least, she had scarcely aged since the days of her first romance; that, through all the time between, her life had remained suspended in a kind of wintry trance from which it was now awakening. It seemed, indeed, as if the ageing of her body had been retarded beneath the same long hibernation; that it, too, had emerged from sleep into a similitude of youth. In certain aspects she could still persuade herself that she was handsome; as a girl she had been pale; now she had more colour in her cheeks, though the colour was fixed, not fugitive. Whenever the days of Wilburn's visits came round, she found herself trying to set that beauty to its best advantage.

She would wake in the morning with a queer, fluttering elation; she would go about the work of the house with restless benevolence. Nothing was too much trouble for her; she seemed to be mistress of her own life, to carry with her such abundance of gaiety, hope and vitality that she was able to shoulder other people's problems as well as her own. The morning's work melted away before her consuming energy, so that she had time to spare. Time for the complete performance of her toilet. Time even to play the piano. Before Wilburn's arrival on the scene nobody but Clare had ever touched its yellow keys since the day of Sylvia's elopement. Now music seemed to flow from her fingers like the flowers of a blackthorn breaking into

bloom. The memory of Lydiatt no longer haunted that room.

And then the evening. It had its climactic moments, like a ritual. Wilburn invariably came out of town by the six o'clock train and returned to North Bromwich by another that left Wychbury at nine-thirty-five. At half-past six, precisely, Catherine could expect to hear the carriage approaching. Neither Ellen nor Mrs. Rudge must ever open the door for him. She went to greet him herself. In the narrow ill-lighted hall, where, twenty years before, Lydiatt had kissed her, their hands met. Only for one moment; for the doctor also was impatient for Wilburn's company. Nothing but a smile and a whispered word about the old man's health while she took Wilburn's coat from him. Then, for the hour before supper, she would sit silent on the other side of the fire, listening to their business discussions, admiring the strength which Wilburn had succeeded in impressing on her father's mind, pretending to be rapt in the popular drawn-thread work, but rarely working; because without spectacles, that tried her eyes, and she could not bring herself to wear them in his presence. They seemed to carry a suggestion of maturity that was not fair to her.

Sometimes, when Wilburn was ready to go, Jabez would be behindhand with the carriage. Then they would stand for long moments in the hall, talking of things that related to the doings of their own generation, in which the doctor was no longer interested. At such times, perhaps, their conspiracy seemed most intimate and enthralling. They were as much alone as they could have been on any mountain top. Sometimes, unexpectedly, he would call her by her christian name. Precious moments . . . moments to live for.

And now, by some peculiar malice of fate, the latest of these ecstasies had been complicated by the coincidence of Clare's return from school and the inexorable onset of one of those

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periodic headaches which devastated Catherine's life and had become such commonplaces that nobody at Pen House—not even the motherly Thirza—took any notice of them. It was always like that. The tenor of her daily life was so automatically subdued that any unusual excitement had power to precipitate this scourge. That morning, as luck would have it, the wind had set in shrewdly from the East, and though they had reached the middle of April, she knew well enough what the sudden chill portended.

So, equally, did Ellen, the village blacksmith's daughter, who shared with Mrs. Rudge the heavier domestic labours of Pen House, and suffered from her mistress's headaches as acutely as Miss Cathie herself. Together, in an atmosphere of tense irritability, they had fallen on Clare's bedroom and submitted it to its second spring-cleaning in six weeks. At the end of the morning Ellen had retired in disorder to Thirza's bosom, Catherine to a darkened room in which she lay for hours on end, fasting, tormented by the prospect of some imperious disturbance on the part of the doctor, and the ruin of an evening to which she had eagerly looked forward for more than a month. In the painful activity of her bewildered mind it seemed to her that Clare was personally responsible for all her troubles: and this, too, distressed her, for she knew that it was unjust, and prided herself upon her sense of justice.

At five o'clock Ellen knocked diffidently at her bedroom door and handed her a telegram which confirmed the hour of Wilburn's arrival. Still sick and giddy, but nerved by the approaching excitement, she dressed herself with care. Before Wilburn's appearance she had always contented herself with the art of the Wychbury dressmaker; but on her last visit to Clare at St. Monica's she had tremulously entered Milton's the mantle-makers, and ordered the very latest example of North

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Bromwich elegance: a bodice of purple velvet with inflated shoulder-of-mutton sleeves, a high, stiff neck-band edged with white frilling, and a black cloth skirt, gathered about the hips with bunches of material that resembled nothing so much as the folds of a curtain above a theatre's proscenium. The pain that she had suffered in purchasing these expensive garments and the shyness with which their magnificence had oppressed her were magnified a hundred times when she put them on. The frilled neck-band frayed her throat like a saw, the waist stifled her with its constriction; and yet, when she stepped back to survey the effect, a flush of excited pleasure lightened, for one moment, her splitting head. Nothing, she knew, could give her back her youth; but nobody, thanks to Milton's artistry, could deny that she was a handsome woman. Secure in the consciousness of a new dignity she examined her fine, dark eyes; her cheeks, a thought too highly coloured for beauty; the firm, if faintly bitter, formation of her lips.

When she had finished her toilet she hurried, quite needlessly, downstairs.

Through the closed door of the dining-room she heard the soothing West-country drone of Mrs. Rudge's voice occasionally broken by the old man's answering grunts. She did not enter. She feared the acid comments which her new finery would provoke, and hoped that later, under the cover of Wilburn's presence she might escape them. Aimlessly she opened the hall door and stepped out on to the gravel drive. The sun had set. Now even the tall pyramids of the Wellingtonias had lost their definition, but though the dank air of the Spring night made her shiver, she knew from the stillness of the shrubberies that the wind had changed. The very silence comforted her. If only Clare had not been coming home!

2

ST. MONICA'S

THAT morning at St. Monica's, Clare had wakened early, her mind taut with excitement. For a long while she had lain quiet with eyes open wide drinking in the new strangeness of her familiar room; its four beds with coarse twill sheets; the sleeping figures of the three girls who shared it with her. Ever since she had come to St. Monica's six years before, a shy and lanky little creature of eleven, through more than half of her conscious life, that room had been the fixed point round which her slow-moving world revolved; this day would dislocate the whole system with the ruthlessness of a stellar convulsion. Probably she would never see it again. Even if she revisited it, it would be no longer hers. From this day forward she would be no different from the other occupants whom she remembered or had forgotten. She would be whirled away into space like Marion Prosser, over whose loss she had cried so bitterly; like Hope Harvey, who was now married; like Esther Reeve. Esther Reeve was dead. . . . Dead, but in no way more lost than those two others, more lost than she herself would be.

It was incredible; so disturbingly incredible that she wished to goodness the other three would wake and distract her thoughts with their chatter. She couldn't bear to approach this crucial day so solemnly. Soon, thank Heaven, there would be plenty of distraction. A morning of packing, of laughter, of strained, hurried farewells; and, in the afternoon, the prizegiving and the school concert. Not that the prize-giving meant much to Clare herself; but the concert was another matter. In this she would perform a small but terrifying part; in this

she would know the pride, the glow, the exultation of hearing her own, her darling, her worshipped Miss Boldmere play. For the last time.

Unless the others wakened she felt she would be forced to cry. She mustn't cry. To cry would have been unworthy of Miss Boldmere. Instead of crying she forced herself to dwell upon the vision of the reseda shantung dress designed by Liberty in which Miss Boldmere would perform. Two nights before Miss Boldmere had shown it to her. It was the most lovely thing on earth, and nobody else at St. Monica's, not even the mistress, had seen it. The thought of this exclusive knowledge made Clare shiver with ecstasy.

One morning, six weeks before, Clare had been working at the tinkling Schubert *Impromptu* which she was to play at the school concert when Miss Boldmere had stolen quietly into the wintry practice room. Even though her eyes were concentrated on the music, Clare knew that it was she. She had felt the blood rising in her cheeks, her red, numbed fingers refused to obey her; a tide of the White Rose scent which Miss Boldmere and no other used enveloped her. She fumbled and came to a stop. Miss Boldmere took her hands in hers, Miss Boldmere was speaking to her:

"Clare, my dear child, your fingers are like ice. The temperature of this room is impossible; I must speak to the headmistress about it!" Miss Boldmere's hands were warm and soft, chafing Clare's numb fingers; and then, in a moment of incredible ecstasy, Clare heard her speaking of things that had no relation to music; of Christ, and the love of Christ and the calm beauty of Mary.

"We don't often talk of these things at St. Monica's," she had said, "but you, Clare, seem to me different from most of the others." How had she guessed it? "I want you," she whispered,

"to know the wonderful happiness that is within the reach of us all. This is your last term, Clare, and soon you'll be leaving us and forgetting us."

As if she could ever forget! But Clare could not speak, and in a few moments, the Schubert *Impromptu* forgotten, she found herself kneeling on the linoleum floor of the practice-room, praying, with one cold hand in Miss Boldmere's. For a moment some faint sense of the ridiculous made her feel shy; but a sudden reaction of shame humbled her. She was overwhelmed by the wonder of such unexpected intimacy. This was the crowning glory of her long adoration; her heart melted into a warm ecstasy.

Even when Miss Boldmere rose and laughed shyly as she brushed the dust from her skirt, her pale cheeks flushed, her grey eyes swimming behind the lenses of her pincenez, Clare's chilly fingers tingled with an infusion of the warmth that filled her mind.

"Now you had better make up for lost time," said Miss Boldmere, "though 'lost' is hardly the right word." She spoke in her ordinary scholastic voice, still a little shaken with emotion. She stood at Clare's left hand. Clare went on playing in a dream. "Take off that pedal! How many times have I told you!" said Miss Boldmere. "One—two—three—four: mind—the—same—touch." Then, like a mouse, she stole away.

But that wasn't the end. Miss Boldmere lent her books. Two or three times she entered the sanctuary of Miss Boldmere's bedroom. Secretly. It wouldn't do to talk about such mysteries. Miss Boldmere burnt incense in her bedroom; odours of paradise. And once, on a Sunday morning, she found herself detached from the double file that trailed soberly to Matins at Alvaston Parish Church, penetrating, in Miss Boldmere's company, strange areas of bricky slum on the way to the Anglican chapel

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of St. Jude. There, once again, in sweet ambient incense, they had knelt side by side, and Clare's heart had fainted in the confused warmth of two adorations. That evening Miss Boldmere gave her a copy of Thomas à Kempis in odorous Russian leather. It lay beneath her pillow and perfumed her dreams. Inside it was written: "To dear Clare from A. B." Agnes Boldmere. St. Agnes. Clare pressed it to her warm heart as she lay that morning waiting for the others to wake. The wan sun faded into a grey sky. A harsh wind troubled the sooty shrubberies. A bell clanged on the landing.

So the day passed in uneasiness and frustration. Nothing could assuage the ache or fill the central emptiness; not even the assumption of the white silk frock, which Aunt Cathie had authorized for the occasion. The hour of the concert came. Miss Boldmere, elegant and serious, in her green shantung, played the *Moonlight Sonata*. Joyce Barrat, clumsily, turned over. Clare sat with her prize, a red, quilted Tennyson, on her knees. Her own turn came. Hurriedly she thrust the Tennyson on to a neighbour's lap and walked to the platform as to a scaffold. As Clare passed her level with flaming cheeks Miss Boldmere's eyes were turned away from her. The perfume of hothouse flowers and scented clothes rose as from a swamp. Her fingers, obeying a habit stronger than volition, began to move. The first phrases of the *Impromptu* tinkled in the air, though she could hardly believe that her hot hands were playing it.

It was over. Amid a silly clapping of hands she rose and retired. Miss Boldmere sat in the front row with lowered eyes. Clare knew what that meant. It meant that she had made a fool of herself, and that was Miss Boldmere's fault. She flushed with anger near to tears. But, as she hurried clumsily down the steps and into the alley between the blocks of chairs, Miss Boldmere raised her eyes and smiled, and it was paradise.

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But the joys of the seventh heaven were reserved for the moment, two hours later, when all the guests and most of the girls had gone. Clare was standing in the hall, her luggage at her feet; the four-wheeler which should take her to the station waited outside. Miss Cash, the head-mistress, came out of her study to give her the little stereotyped farewell that she kept for departing pupils; and as Clare answered: "Yes, Miss Cash," and "Thank you, Miss Cash," and "Oh, of course I will!" her heart grew wretched and more wretched wondering if Miss Boldmere, who had run upstairs to change her dress, had quite forgotten her. She need not have wondered. A rapid step on the stairs brought her heart into her mouth. Miss Boldmere, in a high-necked tailor-made dress, with sleeves puffed at the shoulders, a constricted waist and thirty or forty jet buttons down the front, stood beside them. She spoke with a pretty breathlessness: "If Clare is going to the station, Miss Cash, I think I'll ask if I may share her cab. May I, Clare?"

The head-mistress smiled and left them. Clare found herself alone with her divinity in a musty four-wheeler that smelt of straw. Down all the grim and windy length of the Halesby Road the cab passed slowly; its interior was dim and sepulchral, as if it had habitually been used for funerals; the wheels growled, the windows rattled so incessantly that it was impossible to talk. But Clare's heart was too full for speech; in a rare, exalted silence they sat close together. She was conscious of nothing but the pallor of Miss Boldmere's tired, sweet face above the goffered frilling, the cold gleam of a wintry sky reflected in her eyeglasses, the warm pressure of Miss Boldmere's body. Clare put out her hand. Miss Boldmere took it in hers and held it until they jolted over the cobbles of the station yard.

The platform was a pandemonium of people hurrying for trains bound westward; the great glass vault a sounding board pitilessly returning echoes of their steps, of shrill signal horns and the shrieking of locomotives. Barrows of milk-tins clattered by them. A train from the North roared in with snow on the roofs of its black coaches. In such a tumult they could not even think. Like wisps of straw held together by capillary attraction the current swept them in the direction of the backwater in which the local train stood waiting. They walked up and down until they found an empty second-class carriage.

"But I won't wait, dear," Miss Boldmere shouted. "There's nothing so distressing as protracted good-byes." Her voice sank to a husky whisper scarcely audible: "I want you to take this little gift to remember me by," she said. "Every night when you go to bed you read what it tells you. . . . I shall be doing the same, you see. Reading the same words. A kind of spiritual communion. And so . . ." she hesitated. . . . "You understand? God bless you, my dear."

Clare understood. A small book with a blue cover, and on it in florid gold lettering: The More Excellent Way. She could not summon a single word of thanks. Then, suddenly, Miss Boldmere raised her veil. She took Clare in her arms. At last! For one exquisite moment they clung together. On her young mouth Clare felt the faint downiness of Miss Boldmere's upper lip; and then, a second later, she was gone, carrying with her all the grace and joy and loveliness of life.

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FIRES OF SPRING

SHE was lost, and yet the memory of her kiss remained, penetrating Clare's body and mind like the perfume of Spring

hedgerows and windless woods; a perfume so faint as scarcely to be perceived, yet so potent as to sweeten all her blood and stir within it intuitions of hope and passionate happiness. In those last moments when they had stood together on the roaring platform she had felt that she would need all her courage not to cry; she had even, prudently, prepared for the emergency by making sure that her handkerchief was ready; but now that the end had come she knew that, even if she wanted to, she couldn't cry.

She smiled at her own fears, smiled for a joyousness which she could suppress no more easily than the blackthorn could deny its blossoming. Her mind was thrilled with a tenderness that seemed, once generated, to go on distilling sensual beauty of its own accord; and as the train clanked slowly through that wilderness of slag and cinder the flame in her heart laughed back at the dark flame-lit pennons of smoke and steam that the East wind blew along with her, at the blood-red afterglow of sun or furnace that brooded above the lips of the basin in which the Black Country lies. She glowed, she burned, she was consumed. And she could not understand it. She only knew that no other kiss could have kindled such a flame.

The kisses of Aunt Cathie, for instance, or of her grand-father. Ever since she could remember living at Pen House Aunt Cathie and Dr. Weir had bidden her good-night. Aunt Cathie generally kissed the air in the neighbourhood of her left ear; the kisses of Aunt Cathie were associated with the sensation of a cool, flaccid cheek. Those of her grandfather were bored and bristly; for in later years his feebleness had compromised mid-way between a beard and a clean shave. On festive occasions, at Christmas, on her birthday, on departures or arrivals, old Mrs. Rudge embraced her. The kisses of Mrs. Rudge were wet and lingering, as though in the middle of them she forgot what she was about. They tasted, or smelt, of the

caraway seeds which the old woman had a habit of chewing. Then Marion Prosser's . . . But Marion's were of a jolly, unemotional frankness that made it doubtful if they should be counted at all. Wherein, then, lay the magic of Miss Boldmere's kiss? Partly in the virtue of Miss Boldmere's divinity; more, perhaps, in the sweetness of the mysteries that they had shared. Your sister in Christ: that was what Miss Boldmere had signed herself in her one, her treasured letter. Spiritual communion. That was the meaning of this serene, expansive joy. And in the little book, the devotional calendar which now lay in her lap, reposed an inexhaustible store of this unique ecstasy. How to conserve it? How to be worthy of it?

Her mind descended abruptly to the practical plane. Do unto others. . . . That should not be so very difficult. Of course Aunt Cathie was incalculable, particularly on the days when her headaches exploded, and the day after. Once a fortnight. Everybody except Aunt Cathie herself could always tell when they were coming; an unusual heartiness at breakfast, irritability towards mid-day, then tea, toast, and a hot-water bottle. This period of irritability was one in which allowances must be made. Clare determined to make them. Aunt Cathie's life was not easy, for the doctor, as she always called him, grew always more and more exacting. On some days his bell kept up a continuous tinkle. Now, she, Clare, was no longer a child: she must take her share of the irritation and inconvenience if only they would allow her. She must make herself useful in the house-work too. She must live for others. Obliteration of Self, Miss Boldmere called it. So much for the duty toward her neighbour.

But that was only half of it, and perhaps the least important half. Even if she had not made her promise to Miss Boldmere she was determined to be confirmed. That would be

difficult, for nobody at Pen House, except Mrs. Rudge, in furtive moments of what the doctor called superstition, ever went to church. Her grandfather and Mr. Pomfret, the Vicar, were not even on speaking terms. Through all Clare's childhood she had accepted this situation as a natural phenomenon; now it seemed to her inexplicable and sinister. She would have to question Aunt Cathie about it, two days after the next headache; for she couldn't believe that Aunt Cathie's irreligion was more than an unfortunate habit, or that the feud with the Vicarage arose from anything but misunderstanding. For a moment her imagination flattered her with a vision of herself as a missionary in that godless household. She saw herself kneeling with Aunt Cathie at the foot of her bed, as she and Miss Boldmere had knelt beside the piano. She saw tears of repentance in the eyes of Thirza Rudge. But she couldn't see herself converting her grandfather. And vet he is such a good man, she told herself.

Mawne Road. This windy junction clung to the very lip of the coal-basin; an enormous pit-bank rose sheer behind it, a sterile mound of mineral, black as a night sky, in which coruscations of fire revealed themselves at dusk. The wind that swept it was charged with a smell of fire; the wooden platform sagged, the offices tilted helplessly above subterranean strains. Here the engine stood waiting for its signal; the up-train from Dulston was late; and Clare, gazing out on to the desolate platform, heard the voices of a group of men who had emerged from the first-class carriage next her own.

One she recognized at once as that of Sir Joseph Hingston, the iron-master baronet; the other belonged to Mr. Willis, of Mawne Hall. They were talking, without concealment, about developments at the Sedgebury Main Colliery and of a certain Mr. Furnival, the new manager, of whom Mr. Willis

disapproved. In the background, like aides-de-camp on a battle-field, stood their sons, Edward Willis and Ralph Hingston.

Clare had known the Willises for years and liked them; in the days before his retirement her grandfather had doctored the family at Mawne Hall, and she herself had always been invited to the children's parties that were part of their lavish Christmas programme. Everybody liked Walter Willis; he was so natural and generous; Mrs. Willis was a darling: and Edward, in spite of his shyness, had always seemed to her a nice kind of boy. And yet when the two young men tactfully detached themselves from their parents and strolled up the platform together past her carriage window, a sudden access of shyness compelled Clare to withdraw herself into the shadow.

This queer instinctive withdrawal surprised her and made her go hot with embarrassment. She knew that it was ridiculous to avoid Edward Willis. Perhaps the shyness had something to do with the mood of devotional exaltation in which Miss Boldmere's kiss had left her; perhaps she was anxious, unconsciously, not to break that spell; perhaps, she thought, as the train restarted with a jolt and shook another pattern into her kaleidoscopic brain, perhaps it was the presence of Ralph Hingston, whom she had never seen since the old man had sent him to Oxford five years before.

There was no reason in the world why she should be frightened of the Hingstons except that the whole countryside was full of stories of their wealth and magnificence since Sir Joseph had established himself behind the stucco battlements of Stourford Castle; and Ralph, as she remembered him, was the least formidable of the family: a fair, sanguine, clean-cut boy, with none of the devastating timidity of Edward Willis nor the aloofness of his brother George, the heir. She knew that she had behaved like a giggling school-girl, and was ashamed of it;

for now she was a school-girl no longer. She was seventeen. At eighteen her mother had run away to be married. By the time that her mother was nineteen Clare herself had been born. Something must be done about it.

But, for the moment, she had time to do nothing. The black dome of the Mawne Road spoil-heap fell away on her left into the tree-softened contours of Mawne Bank, among which, as Mr. Willis proudly maintained, nightingales were still to be heard. On such a raw and windy evening as this no nightingale would dare to sing; and yet, as the train swung round beneath the cover of the hills, it seemed as though the air grew softer; the smell of baking bricks and fire no longer scorched it. She threw open the window; she leaned out into the darkness and let the wind stream through her dark hair till her skin glowed in reaction and her heart beat faster. In the rush of the wind her religious preoccupations, her instinctive self-consciousness, all the habitual inhibitions of life at school were blown clean away. She emerged from it new-born as from a rite of baptism.

Stourton Junction. She wondered suddenly if Sir Joseph and Ralph Hingston had rejoined the train when Mr. Willis had left them at Mawne Road; for this was the station at which, in the ordinary way, they would leave it. It must be so; for there, on the platform, stood the Hingstons' cockaded footman. She resolved to be stupid and shy no longer. She stood at the carriage window with her wild wind-blown hair and called "Good-evening" as they passed. Sir Joseph did not hear her, but Ralph turned suddenly and raised his hat and smiled; it was a very charming smile: a smile that dawned in the blue wide-set eyes before it reached his big, good-humoured mouth. That mouth, whose full lips disclosed a row of square and regular teeth, as white as a healthy animal's, was shadowed now by a fair moustache, which showed her that the boy of her acquaint-

ance had become a man. A tall young man, loose-limbed, too heavy-shouldered, whose clumsiness as well as his strength were scarcely hidden by his peat-smelling Harris tweeds. As he stood smiling at the carriage window those masculine smoky odours of turf and tobacco enveloped her. If Clare had known that he was as formidable and grown-up as that she would never have dared to speak to him.

"Hello!" he said, "home for the holidays?"

"I'm home for good," she answered breathlessly. "I've left school!"

"Good luck. I must tell Vivien. Au revoir! The guv'nor's in a hurry."

Sir Joseph, who had handed a dispatch case to the footman, stood waiting for him at the door of the booking office. The stationmaster bowed them out. With a flush of achievement on her cheeks Clare returned to her corner. How wonderful it must be, she thought, to live at Stourford; to have a footman waiting to carry things that you could perfectly well carry yourself; to be a baronet. But Ralph would never be a baronet unless George died. And George, four years ago, had married Eleanor Pomfret, a sort of cousin of the Vicar whom her grandfather disliked. In another five minutes the train was due at Wychbury, where Jabez Bean would be waiting to drive her home in the victoria. She stood up in the swaving carriage and tried to tidy her hair by the help of a glazed photograph of the Wyndcliff at Chepstow. It was no good; the wind had entangled it hopelessly; and so she jammed on her wide-brimmed sailor hat and collected her scattered luggage, just as the brakes shrieked on the gradient falling to Wychbury station. The little platform received her with indifference. At the rear of the train a single porter leaned against a pile of milk-cans. From his office door Mr. Hemus, the stationmaster, considered the train and any possible passengers impersonally in the light of four miserable oil-lamps set on wooden posts. Clare hurried up to him.

"Has Jabez come with the carriage, Mr. Hemus?" she asked. "That I can't say, Miss," he answered. "I shouldn't wonder if he has."

As a concession to politeness he shouted down the platform to the porter, who was now rolling milk-cans into the van: "George! Have you seen aught of the doctor's Jabez?" But the porter, deafened by the noise that he and the guard were making, could not hear him.

"It doesn't matter a bit, Mr. Hemus," Clare said. "Please don't bother. Of course I can see for myself."

"That's true enough, Miss," said Mr. Hemus. "If he's there, he's there. I suppose you've got that ticket?"

Clare, in her eagerness, had forgotten all about it. She couldn't even remember in which pocket she had so carefully placed it. She put down her bag and began to search. It was no good; her gloves encumbered her fingers so that they could not feel. "I shall have to take them off," she said, and while Mr. Hemus watched the process sympathetically, she was suddenly startled by a firm grip on her arm from behind.

"Hello, young woman," said a deeper voice.

"Good-evening, Mr. Wilburn, good-evening, sir," said the stationmaster, suddenly deferential.

Clare turned quickly. "Oh, Mr. Wilburn, I've lost my ticket."

Wilburn laughed. "Your ticket? Travelling without having paid your fare? That's a serious matter, isn't it, Hemus. And I can't defend you, I'm afraid. You know we represent the Company. Isn't that so?"

Mr. Hemus assented. Hence his surprising deference. He

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knew better than to ask Dudley Wilburn for his. The Wilburns always travelled "on pass."

"Well, you won't have to," said Clare, triumphantly producing the blue slip of pasteboard. "I knew it was there all the time. Thank you so much, Mr. Hemus."

Wilburn stooped and picked up her bag. "Is this all? Nothing in the van?"

"Allow me, sir," said Mr. Hemus.

"No, that's all," said Clare quickly. "The rest is coming by the carrier. But please don't carry it. Jabez is sure to be outside. . . . I hope so anyway."

"So do I," said Wilburn.

"Why, have you come to see grandpapa?"

"Clever little girl!"

"Oh, then, he's sure to be there," said Clare. "What fun!"

Again Wilburn laughed; her frankness amused him. He was even a little surprised, for since he had last seen her, the child had developed enormously. As they passed toward the victoria on the box of which old Jabez sat hunched in his seedy livery, he couldn't help looking at her face under the broad-brimmed hat. This face aroused in him a peculiar poigancy of emotion, for in its poise, its purity of feature and in the dark wide eyes he could recall another, the face of the exquisite, the unapproachable Sylvia Weir which had enthralled him in his boyhood. Now he was thirty-five, a widower with two children, and yet the memory of this adolescent passion, rarefied in its remoteness, had power to make him restless, to renew the wistful atmosphere of another Spring more than eighteen years ago; the flush of young larchwoods on the southern slope of Uffdown, the heavy scent of may. Sometimes he had surprised the ghost of some such remembrance in the company of Clare's Aunt Cathie; but with her it had been fugitive, while here, walking at Clare's side, it swept over him suddenly, sweetly, like the perfume of wild white violets. An April madness, he told himself, and yet, as he stepped into the victoria and settled upon the cushions, aware of Clare's soft presence at his side, he found himself saying: "Clare, do you know that you grow more like your mother every day?"

"Do I?" she whispered eagerly. "Oh, do tell me how."

"Her voice, her colouring, the tilt of her head," he told her.

"But she was lovely, you know," said Clare.

He laughed, and the laugh made her feel that she had said something silly and had better hold her tongue. It was the first time that anyone except the devoted Marion had ever spoken to her of her physical attractions; but all regret for the bold innocence of her reply was quickly lost in a thrill of pleasure at the comparison. What thrilled her was not that her mother had been beautiful, but only that she was like her; for the image of her mother, eagerly reconstructed for want of memory from the reticences of Aunt Cathie and Mrs. Rudge's meanderings, had been her principal imaginative idol before the advent of the more tangible Miss Boldmere.

As they drove through the lanes that climbed toward Pen House, this romantic image, with its faint airs of passion and tragedy, was as near to her as to Wilburn, and so sweet that she dared not break the devotional air of their silence. She hoped, indeed, that her quietness would tempt him to say more; but when he next spoke she knew that, as usual, the subject had been dropped. His words were an echo of Ralph Hingston's on the platform at Stourton: "What are you doing here?" he said. "Home for the holidays?"

"I've left St. Monica's," she told him. "I'm coming home for good."

"Does that mean that you're grown up?" he said. "If I'd

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known that I should have treated you with more respect. I suppose the next thing is to put up your hair."

"It's up already," she said; "only the wind's blown it to

bits."

"And what are you going to do?"

She became serious. "I suppose I shall help in the house. There are always lots of things to do at home. And I shall work at my music. Oh, you've no idea . . ."

"I don't suppose I have," he said. "When my daughters are as old as you I expect I shall want them to keep house for me; but I've a long time to wait for that."

"They're darlings," said Clare.

"Yes, I suppose they are; but I don't see much of them. I'm a hard-worked, middle-aged business-man, Clare. I get older and older every year."

She said: "Yes, of course you do." He laughed. It wasn't exactly the answer that he had expected, and yet its directness pleased him. It had never occurred to Clare to consider him anything but middle-aged. For years and years she had always thought of him as a member of Aunt Cathie's generation who came to Pen House occasionally to advise her grandfather on legal and financial matters. Definitely he belonged to their world, not to hers, and to that part of their world which was associated with money and mortgages and serious decisions. The fact that so wise a tyrant as her grandfather deferred to him in these matters only emphasized the distance between them. Everybody at Pen House trusted Dudley Wilburn and everybody seemed fond of him. Clare liked him too. His strong, square, rather swarthy face, his straight mouth and his slow smile.

That evening she was liking him more than ever before, principally because of the romantic interest of his reference to

her mother, a little because of the implied compliment to herself, and more than a little because of his stable, solid composure as he sat beside her, and the concession which his friendliness implied. Not so much a concession, after all; for, as he had said, she was now nearly, if not quite, grown up; and to be admitted to such a friendship was one of the privileges of her new status. She liked the smell of him too; it reminded her of Ralph Hingston; a composite odour of homespun and of cigarette which he had asked her permission to light. It was strange and potent and masculine in its suggestions. By the time they had climbed the hillside to Pen House she was getting used to it and talking to him so naturally that it surprised her to hear the wheels of the victoria grating on the gravelled drive. And when the carriage stopped before the porch he dismounted before her and offered her the support of his hand: a broad, long-fingered hand in which her own was almost lost, "Oh, thank you, so much, Mr. Wilburn," she said, "Thank vou for your company, Miss Lydiatt," he answered. Perhaps he was only making solemn fun of her.

4

A GHOST WALKS

CLARE ran in front to open the door within the porch, for Wilburn's hands were encumbered with her luggage, and as she reached it the shadow of Aunt Cathie loomed against the frosted glass. The door opened in front of her, and Aunt Cathie appeared. Never had Clare seen her so magnificently dressed. The new purple velvet bodice took away her breath. In addition to the turquoise ring that always mysteriously en-

circled her engagement finger, Aunt Cathie wore a long gold chain attached to the watch in her waistband, an amethyst necklace and a silver chatelaine. This was not all. In the three months of Clare's absence Aunt Cathie's hair had not only grown glossier and darker, but was cut above the forehead in a fringe. Undeterred by this transformation Clare hurried forward to kiss her; but Aunt Cathie's eyes, which shone with an unusual brightness in keeping with her attire, avoided her, and the flushed cheek that Clare's lips approached was quickly averted. Aunt Cathie had eyes for nobody but Mr. Wilburn.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "The doctor has been fidgety all day expecting a reply to his telegram. It only reached us an hour ago."

"I'm sorry," said Wilburn. "I didn't get it till late in the afternoon and only just managed to catch the train. Luckily Clare was on it, and gave me a lift in return for my services as a porter."

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that," said Aunt Cathie, suddenly aware of Clare's luggage. "Clare shouldn't have let you. Jabez would have carried it in. Hurry up, Clare, and take your bag from Mr. Wilburn; I can't imagine what you're thinking of."

"It's not her fault," said Wilburn with a smile. "She tried to stop me, didn't you, Clare?"

Clare blushed. She couldn't answer him. As a matter of fact she had done nothing of the sort; but the lie sustained her, as evidence of their new and unexpressed alliance. Aunt Cathie did not wait for her reply. "Young and thoughtless!" she went on. "You'd better take it upstairs yourself. If it's too heavy, leave it. Ellen's busy with supper now; she can help you later. Do come along, Mr. Wilburn."

She turned and Wilburn followed her into the darkness of

the inner hall. Clare heard them talking in lowered, confidential tones. Her mood of exultation had given way to one of vague distress. She picked up the bag that Wilburn had left on an oak bench and dragged it upstairs. Of course it was heavy; but its very weight seemed to offer a contest into which she might lose her unhappiness. Young and thoughtless! She had not been thoughtless; and as for youth—youth was not a thing to be despised. Aunt Cathie herself didn't despise it. If she did she certainly wouldn't have darkened her hair and had it cut in a fringe and got herself dolled up in purple velvet. It was just like Aunt Cathie to go discrediting and belittling her in front of Mr. Wilburn. If she wanted to be rude she should keep her reflections till they were alone. "And anyway, I'm not young," she thought, "or at least not as young as all that. I'm seventeen."

She lit two candles on the dressing-table—the doctor objected to the smell of gas, and Aunt Cathie comforted herself by declaring that it ruined the silver—and began to brush her hair violently; and when with this she had exhausted the spurious energy of indignation, she sat on with the long tresses spread over her shoulders, half conscious of her reflection in the Chippendale mirror and of the objects, familiar but newly interesting, which Ellen had arranged on her dressing-table: the lacquer glove-box, the pin-tray, the antlered china ring-stand that always stood there empty. There, too, hung a yellow photograph of her mother, the only one in the house, which Aunt Cathie, in one of her queer moments of kindliness, had given her on her birthday. It reminded Clare how kind, on occasion, how bewilderingly familiar, Aunt Cathie could be; and this made her suddenly doubtful of her own right to be angry.

Only an hour before she had formed sacred resolutions to make allowances, and now, at the first moment of contact, she

had not made them. Perhaps Aunt Cathie was suffering from one of those headaches—the unusual excitement of Mr. Wilburn's visit might easily have precipitated an attack; perhaps some sudden change in her grandfather's health had made this visit necessary; Clare hadn't, for one moment, considered the possibility of excuses for Aunt Cathie's behaviour. Thoughtless: the word was justified. It was not enough, Miss Boldmere would have said, to repent. She must make amends. The thought of the humiliation to which she would subject herself gave her a certain savage satisfaction.

The clock in the hall struck a leisurely seven. Her grand-father couldn't be as ill as all that, for he always insisted on winding it himself on Sundays. To-day was Monday, and yesterday he had evidently wound it up. Supper was always on the table at seven-thirty; she had half an hour to waste before she appeared in the room in which her elders were now talking business. It struck her that the most appropriate symbol of repentance would be to change her silk frock for something more modest; but this could not be done, for all her every-day clothes were now lumbering out to Wychbury in the carrier's van; so she sat on at the dressing-table in the comfort of a good motive frustrated, idly surveying her own reflection and the faded image of her mother's photograph.

Out of this dream she seemed to hear Mr. Wilburn's voice: "Clare, do you know that you grow more like your mother every day?" The words awakened her with a return of the old excitement. Could they be really true? She took down the photograph and compared its details with that of the reflection before her. Yes, it was true. Feature by feature she verified the likeness: the same fine, dark eyebrows that gave to wide-set eyes a look of earnest concentration; the same straight nose, too insignificant for absolute beauty; the same firm, small mouth; the

same challenging, expectant tilt of the head. The hair, of course, was all wrong; for while hers fell in disorder about her shoulders, the hair of the portrait was swept backward above the ears like that of the ladies in du Maurier's drawings.

But this was easily remedied. She set to work, with an absorbed and half instinctive mimicry, imitating with careful accuracy the photograph's coiffure. How fortunate that she now had hairpins to do it with! How strange and how exciting that she should be able to reproduce everything so exactly! The colour came into her cheeks, her eves glowed; everything of the actress in her was on fire. She stepped back to survey herself at a distance and shivered with delight. The hair was a little fuller. How lovely her mother was! She'd said that before to Mr. Wilburn, and he had only laughed; but now that the dead woman had come to life it was true . . . true! Something was lacking. She realised triumphantly that the lack could be remedied. On her fifteenth birthday Aunt Cathie had given her the chain and the oval locket with Clare's own hair in it which her mother was wearing in the photograph. It lay, together with Lydiatt's poor little garnet engagement ring, in the small box of olive-wood from Terusalem in which she kept her treasures. She passed the chain of the locket carefully over her head. Why not the ring as well? She had as much right to wear it as Aunt Cathie had to wear hers. Miss Boldmere, who was not engaged, wore one too; but that was a symbol of her mystical union with her Redeemer. The ring was rather tight. What tiny fingers her mother must have had! So tight that when once she had slipped it on she was overwhelmed with panic lest it should have to be cut off by a jeweller, like Mrs. Rudge's wedding ring. Such a disaster would give her away hopelessly. She struggled with it: but her fingers were moist with excitement, and the ring stuck. And then the dinner-bell clanged in the hall below.

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It was hopeless. Punctuality was a foible of the doctor's to which Aunt Cathie subscribed with the bigotry of a convert, and this was an occasion made exceptional by Wilburn's presence. Even if she took down her hair and discarded the locket that obstinate ring must remain to give her away. In this divided mind a helpless panic seized her. She ran downstairs, hurried along the passage and opened the dining-room door.

For all the rest of her life she was to remember that moment and that scene. Before her lay the low-ceiled room with its heavy shadows of mahogany furniture. The beams of a hanging lamp fell like limelight on the linen cloth and three figures sitting round it. At the top of the table her grandfather; a big man, bowed with age. She saw his bald head bent over the plates in front of him, a white wrinkled dome, too desiccated to shine; the frowning eves above his thin nose, and that sparse growth of beard and whisker that gave an ashen pallor to the flesh surrounding his bluish lips. In one hand he held a game-carver; in the other a steel with which he whetted the blade to a surgical acuteness. On his right sat Dudley Wilburn, upright, well-knit; his dark eyes fascinated by the twinkling blade; on the left Aunt Cathie, her cheeks still flushed, the string of amethysts glancing on her bodice as if they were an index of the emotion within. All three were so absorbed that they did not notice Clare's arrival. Their silence perturbed her; and, even more, the empty chair at the foot of the table which proclaimed her unpunctuality brought an excuse to her lips. "I'm so sorry," she said and hesitated, petrified with shyness.

Suddenly all three were looking at her. Her grandfather stared fixedly, unmoved, above his suspended steel. Then Wilburn started backward: "Good lord!" he said. "Good lord, it's Clare!" Aunt Cathie drew her breath in a quick gasp. Her

cheeks went suddenly white, wrinkled, old. Then back came the colour in a flood. She pushed away her chair, rose to her feet, and spoke in a shrill, unnatural voice: "What is the meaning of this?" she flamed. "How dare you, Clare? How dare you?"

"Auntie," Clare stammered. "Auntie!" The voice frightened her.

"Go to your room. How dare you? Go to your room at once!" Clare went. Aunt Cathie, tall and trembling, followed her to the door and shut it behind her. Clare waited, dazed with astonishment at the unexpected fury, in the passage outside. Something terrible, of which she herself was guilty, had happened. Inside the closed door a sinister silence brooded, until she heard Aunt Cathie speaking with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm sorry, so sorry," she was saying. "It took my breath away."

"After all the child couldn't help it," Wilburn answered calmly. "I was only thinking this evening . . ."

"Couldn't help it?" the other voice repeated. "No, it was deliberate. And she isn't a child. She's seventeen . . . nearly eighteen."

Her grandfather grunted. "Mustard, Wilburn? Catherine, pass Mr. Wilburn the mustard."

Clare stole on tiptoe along the hall. The furniture, the very walls seemed aware of her passing as though some ghostly memory had stirred them in their sleep. The broad brass face of the grandfather clock regarded her. The staircase creaked under her feet as she hurried back to her bedroom where the two candles still flared in the draught from the open window. She sat down again in front of the mirror and began to take down her hair; mechanically, out of sheer bewilderment. Then tears filled her eyes, so that her own image became blurred.

Still crying, miserably and for no reason, she continued to undress. She guided the locket over her head and tugged at the ring. Now it slipped easily from her cold finger as though it knew that its malicious work was over. Then, like a punished child she blew out the candles and crept into the cool sheets; but even their comforting stimulus could not check her tears; and brown owls, hunting in the shubberies, mimicked her with their faint, wild whimpering.

Gradually, under pressure of the darkness, her scared mind grew more sober; her breath became soft and steady, unchecked by the convulsion of sobbing. The whole incident now appeared to her fantastic and Aunt Cathie's outburst a thing to be resented. But even so she could not forget the transformation of Aunt Cathie's face. It troubled her tranquillity, accusing her of failure in all the righteous resolutions she had made. She thought to herself, "What would Miss Boldmere do?" and the question carried with it the suggestion of a duty neglected, which set her groping in the dark for a box of matches with which to relight her candle.

The blue gold-lettered book lay on the dressing-table where she had left it. She turned the pages eagerly, thrilled by an unreasoning hope that some mystical power might present her with a ready-made solution for her distress. The heading of April the nineteenth referred her to an obscure passage of dialectic in the Epistle to the Hebrews. She read it through three times without understanding one word of it. She grew angry with her own ignorance and stupidity, determined to wrest from it the consolation which it was warranted to contain. And slowly, miraculously, that consolation came, not through the persuasions of St. Paul, but from the consciousness that, in this very moment, Miss Boldmere was doing the same. Spiritual communion. Once more she felt that she was going to

cry, but this time with happiness. Distantly, as she fell asleep, she heard the wheels of the carriage that was taking Wilburn to the station grate upon the gravel beneath.

5

STILL LIFE

W HEN Clare had gone, Aunt Cathie, still flushed and palpitating, returned to her seat at the supper-table. She could not eat. On these days of headache it was wiser to starve. She knew that she had made an exhibition of herself; that one rude gesture had humiliated her for ever before Wilburn, in whose eyes, particularly, she wished to appear at her best. The words: "How dare you? How dare you?" kept on reforming themselves mechanically in her mind, even while she knew that it was her duty to apologize for her loss of control. But she could not trust herself to speak; and so she sat on, staring at the willow-pattern on her empty plate, listening to the business consultation which her father would not allow so small a matter as a woman's temper to interrupt.

She could only listen; for in these matters, or even in others of which she was more qualified to speak, the old man would not have respected her opinion. However long she lived she knew that he would never regard her as anything but a child. It was an attitude which the childishness of her outburst justified; and yet she couldn't help resenting it when she saw the reliance that he seemed to place in Wilburn's judgment; for Wilburn, after all, was even a little younger than herself.

Dr. Weir, with the disinterested asceticism of age, ate nothing; but all through the meal he kept the visitor busy with his

shrewd questions and commentary on the new developments at the Sedgebury Main Colliery, to which Wilburn, in his capacity of friend and lawyer, had advised a transfer of investments. He crouched above the head of the table like an old, bald vulture; his eyes piercing the darkness beyond the lighted supper-table, his gruff voice rasping like a file.

"So Hingston is in it, is he?"

"Up to the neck."

"Hingston's a bounder."

"Possibly. But Hingston's a shrewd fellow."

"The concern's over-capitalized, like everything else hereabouts. The same thing's happening all round us. Walter Willis at Mawne's another. Willis is a good fellow; but none of them can see a yard in front of their noses. No sense of history."

Wilburn smiled; he had heard all this before; and yet, usually, he had his way.

"No sense of history," the doctor repeated. "This country's been at peace ever since the Crimea. You don't remember that. Human nature can't exist without wars. Plague, pestilence and famine: history's a disciple of Malthus. Huh? We're too thick on the ground. Sooner or later that means labour troubles. You're too cocksure like all the rest of them. Ignorant, if you prefer it."

Wilburn shook his head:

"Sedan changed all that. Modern weapons make war impossible."

"Impossible!" the doctor grunted. "Look at South Africa. What's this monkey game of Jameson's? Suppose the Dutchmen want to fight?"

"They don't," said Wilburn. "But if they did, so much the better for the Black Country and Walter Willis: so much the better for the Sedgebury Main. You can't make guns without

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coal and iron. With or without war, the Black Country's going to boom."

"I like to see my money on the top of the earth, not under it," the old man growled. "I tell you frankly, I don't like mining shares."

"But then you don't know Furnival. The fellow's a genius. Of course you can do what you like; but Sedgebury Main Preference at twelve and six is a thing that you'll never see again."

So they went on; and through it all Aunt Cathie's heart beat violently, driving the blood in throbs to her tormented head. They talked endlessly of things that she had neither the will nor wish to understand; and by nine o'clock, when Jabez drove round to take Wilburn to the station, and she herself followed him out to the dark drive to say good-bye, she was almost glad to think that the visit that she had anticipated so eagerly was over.

She stood on the wide terrace fronting the house and watched the lights disappear into the shadows of the shrubberies. She followed them to the first turn of the drive. Behind her two greater shadows, those of the hill that gave the house its name and of its twin dome of Uffdown, thickened the northern sky. Southward not a light was to be seen but the intermittent glow of a goods train grinding down toward Worcester with its iron freight. Even by daylight those wide, green levels held little that suggested distraction or surprise; for though the jagged outline of Malvern, black and imminent above the elm-tops in days of storm, might conjure aspirations, their appeal was so remote and so modified by the intervening expanses that it seemed to be related to some future life; and now this dark monotony oppressed her.

She turned back from the corner to which her feet had car-

ried her in pursuit of the victoria's lights, toward the house. That sombre Georgian building, its low-browed stucco front unbroken by the impetuous gables of periods more restless and romantic, contemplated her serenely through eight uniform windows. That night she hated its sleepy, rectangular complacency; but even so, she knew that it was as essentially part of her life as is the shell to the snail; without its habitual shelter she would be vulnerable, naked, defenceless. For thirty-eight years she had known no other; now she would never leave it.

She had looked forward so happily to Clare's arrival. She loved Clare; and she did not love Wilburn. In their relation, as she had told herself a thousand times, there was nothing but a frank, admiring, ideal friendship. And yet, that evening, what with her headache and the excitement of their appearance at the same moment, she had lost her sense of proportion and her temper together.

Now, in the soothing darkness of the drive, she couldn't bear to think of it. Poor little Clare! It wasn't Clare's fault that a natural instinct had prompted her to this devilish trick. Clare didn't know what it had meant to her; she hoped that Clare would never know. But for this ghastly head nothing would have happened.

Entering the hall she heard the mumble of Mrs. Rudge putting the doctor to bed. She could hardly bear to say good-night to him. Not that he would mention the humiliating subject; his mind was far too full of money for that. As soon as his head touched the pillow he would fall asleep like a child, waking automatically at four o'clock in the morning to concentrate once more upon the prospects of the Sedgebury Main. But Aunt Cathie knew that she would not sleep until the fierceness of her headache had spent itself. Flat on her bed she lay, a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-cologne spread over her beating temples.

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Her head ached continually; before her eyes, or somewhere at the back of them in that inferno of pressure, there glowed and faded roses of blue flame and coruscating tracks of fire, jagged, like lightning.

If Catherine had only known it, these heartburnings and sympathies were wasted on Clare. Her youth had power of itself to pierce the age-bound hardness of Pen House as surely as the spears of daffodils break soil that is sealed with frost. For in that single night the full Spring burst upon them. Next morning, out of the watery brilliance of the South, clouds came driving; clouds of a high and dazzling brightness, blown like white pollen from the flower of the sky. The rich plain seemed dusted with this fallen bloom; in the walled orchard at the back of Pen House plum-trees made drifts of their snowy blossom. The shrubberies woke to the timid voices and rustlings of chiffchaff and willow-wren, first-comers of the winged clouds migrating northward. In the garden at St. Monica's only loud chaffinches had flung their hard, challenging cries from the forks of the smoke-blackened apple-trees in which they were to nest. Those, and the blackbirds, whose harsh stutters of alarm seemed more frequent than their songs.

As for Aunt Cathie: according to her new rule of life Clare had made allowances. Next morning she kissed her at breakfast as though no harsh word had been spoken. It wasn't difficult; for Aunt Cathie, despite her morning frostiness, had moved halfway to meet her in an affecting reconciliation that troubled them both, since the elder acknowledged her fault, the younger had nothing to forgive, and neither realized the other's pathetic anxiety to make amends.

In another week Clare had forgotten all about it. These were days not only of Spring but of holiday. Released into this month of sweet, dazzling weather, she feasted on all the beauty that Alvaston had denied her. It was not merely that she was free, standing, with St. Monica's behind her, on the brink of a new life; she had reached, for the first time, a point of spiritual development at which she could appreciate her freedom. It carried with it a sense of power and of possession. The hills were hers; all that green flank of Pen Beacon up to the standing stones; all Uffdown's dome of furze, an almond-scented wilderness. There, on the windy summit, she could command the dominions of fire and water: the scorched basin of the Black Country and the moist Severn Plain. Into the tender sky above them her heart fluttered like a rising lark. Hers too, with a softer emotion, were the red-banked lanes of primrose and white violet that drained the valley, falling to Uffdown Manor. For her, descending at evening time, the trout leapt in the Sling fish-ponds between flats of swimming water-lilies. On her way home she gathered to herself the secrets of the meadowland below the mill-race, imprisoned in the viscid stems of king-cups, the pungent leaves of horse-mint growing clumpy in the marshland, the airy, moth-like flowers of lilac lady's-smocks. By these possessions she was possessed, till all her heart was Spring; so brimmed with vernal loveliness that she must give, give, give of its overflowing. And then the cuckoo came.

In a while the first ecstasy of freedom passed. Clare did not grudge its passing; her heart still sang, though its song was attuned to the tenor of life at Pen House and modified by its smooth, unchanging rhythm. Duties were assigned to her by Aunt Cathie, all leisurely and soothing. In the early morning she helped Ellen to make the beds. All through this business of stretching, folding and tucking in sheets, subdued sounds of human activity stole up like a slow smoke from the village beneath them. And Ellen would tell her all the gossip of Wychbury as she punched the pillows into shape, in words that lent

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an actuality to those homely sounds: the tinkle of her father's anvil, the creak of cartwheels in the lane, the faint voices of women and birds and beasts subdued, by their remoteness, to a hum that was like that of bees buzzing in lime-blossom.

After a little time, Ellen, emboldened, began to tell Clare things that she would never have dared to mention to Aunt Cathie; for Ellen was walking out with a young man who worked at the Uffdown mill, and it pleased her to ask the advice of Clare, a contemporary if not an equal, on nice matters of conduct. "There now, I knew you'd think that!" she said. "It's a proper treat to have you here, Miss."

No doubt she spread Clare's fame among the villagers; for now, whenever she went down shopping into Wychbury, people whom she did not know gave her their smiles; and once a red-faced young man whose back was dusted with flour as a bee's velvet with pollen, pulled off his cap and beamed at her. It was jolly for Ellen to be in love. A right and natural state, in keeping with the rich, languorous expectancy of those days. For now the meadows were alive with calling cuckoos. It was right and natural for Ellen to interpret the impulse of the season in a way that could not conceivably touch Clare herself. She smiled at Ellen's love-making and thought little of it.

It was strange that a life so static should seem so crowded. In the first week of it Clare had wondered, with a mild restlessness, if she were ever again going to see a human being apart from the inhabitants of Pen House. She had left St. Monica's with the expectancy of new and surprising human contacts. She remembered how gaily Ralph Hingston had called back to her on Stourton platform that he would tell his sister Vivien of her arrival; but weeks passed, and she heard nothing of the Hingstons but her grandfather's habitual growls at their magnificence. Probably Ralph had forgotten all about her; and

really it didn't matter, for there was no room for the Hingstons in her routine. Duty came first, and after that there seemed too little time to spare for her particular pleasures.

Toward the end of the morning she could generally snatch her half-hour's practice at the piano. The old Broadwood was more worn than the worst of the practice-room pianos at St. Monica's; its keys seemed flat and unresponsive, their ivory streaked with yellow like the teeth of an old horse; the bass notes were tinny, the treble out of tune; and yet it enabled Clare to transport herself to heights of emotional experience that she could never otherwise attain. Her own school music slowly became stale and too familiar; but in the lockers of an ebony cupboard, fretted with gilt arabesques and smelling of must and pot-pourri, she discovered, one day, a pile of yellow sheet-music, most of which bore her mother's name.

It was a curious collection, reflecting the superficial brilliance of a young lady's accomplishment in the eighteen-eighties; show-pieces of Heller, Henselt, Mendelsshon and Moscheles; dead operatic arias festooned with tinkling arpeggios; Field, and Rubinstein, and Sterndale-Bennett. But though she knew that they were trivial, she played them all, not realizing that their echoes might have awakened the furniture of the drawing-room, whose life had stopped short before the period of blue china, peacock's feathers and enamelled milking-stools, to a ghostly renewal of consciousness. Only Aunt Cathie knew. For her the tinkling triviality of Clare's arpeggios raised ghosts enough. But she suffered their haunting silently, telling herself that the child had talent and must be allowed to express it. An inheritance: Lydiatt, she had imagined, in those old days, was a master.

So Clare played on: not so much because the old-fashioned music pleased her as because mere contact with those yellow

pages seemed to connect her spiritually with her mother. At such times that image, mystically adored, grew, not clearer, but definitely more near. This cult was new to her. In earlier years her mother's history had never aroused her curiosity; but ever since that dark drive up from Wychbury in which Mr. Wilburn's words had set her quivering with delight, her mind, eager for new devotions, had fastened on the idea and pursued it. Now, for the first time, that story seemed to hold a personal significance, since she herself, at the distance of twenty years, was following like a phantom in the footsteps of that frail romantic figure. These ivory keys her mother's fingers had touched in the same series of co-ordinate movements: no one had touched them since. Over these stairs and through these lanes her mother's feet had passed. She saw herself not as herself but as a reincarnation, mysteriously following on ghostly guidance. And when the gong sounded for lunch and she found herself again in the presence of Aunt Cathie and her grandfather she felt confused, as though she had emerged from a dream whose figments still seemed real.

For them, Clare knew by instinct, and by the fact of its avoidance, the subject was forbidden. She realized, vaguely, that her mother's career had ended in some event which was distasteful to them both. The effect of her apparition at the supper-table had shown her that; but this, indeed, did nothing but make her dear phantom more pathetic and beloved, and herself more eager to penetrate the mystery.

One afternoon in early May, when the plum-blossom had fallen and cherries and pear-trees stood in snowy pyramids, Clare went up to sit and talk with Mrs. Rudge. There, like a pale pink fondant, the face of Thirza rose from the white apron that covered her voluminous bust, above it a white cap with a goffered frill. Her cheeks were lax and downy, puck-

ered by age to a childish softness; her lips, too, were soft, and always rather moist. Habitually they smiled in the peace of an assured Nirvana, and the words that issued from them still kept the burr of the West Country from which, fifty years before, she had come to Wychbury. She sat there placidly, surrounded by awkward-postured portraits of her family. Several of them had died; but, dead or living, she still rejoiced in their possession. She spoke of them all as though they had remained for ever fixed in the state in which they were portrayed. The stories that she told of them were trifling, but never tedious, for her slow tongue had the power of communicating to the thoughts it uttered something of its native languor. All Thirza's stories smelt heavy with the scents of summer noons.

As she spoke she waddled heavily about the little room, as though the volume of her skirts swayed her from side to side; and while she busied herself with the making of tea, a ritual as strict in its detail as the consecration of a sacrament, Clare tried to coax or startle the old woman into talking of what she sought.

"Was mother as tall as me, Thirza?"

"Why, no, Miss Clare. Miss Sylvia must have been an inch or two shorter than you since you've shot up so. Miss Cathie was the taller. I can see them now, standing up again' that wall to measure it. Slight you'd call her, rather than thin. But that was before the days of wasp-waists, my dear. Many's the time I've laced them up. I ought to know! Then the bustles came in. No need for bustles when you've a'passed forty. Now, my dear, us'd better warm that pot. Ah, my dear life, this was a gay house in they days when the doctor had his strength! You should have seen them playing croquet. That was the croquet lawn, over there where Jabez has got his currant bushes now. You could have watched them out of this very window.

Lovely and graceful they looked. That Mr. Wilburn now; I can remember him coming up here as a lad from school. All the gentlemen wore whiskers in those days, and properly handsome they were, I can tell you."

"Did father play croquet, Thirza?"

"Two for you and me and one more," Thirza murmured. "This brown pot, I wouldn't lose it for a fortune, nor trust it in that Ellen's hands. But we never get the tea now we used to get. It used to come in boxes with red dragons on the outside. Croquet? No, not your father, Miss Clare. He never came for that. Only for the music-lessons. Tuesdays and Fridays he used to come. The doctor never took to him that way. Not his class. vou might say. But there! Love-making takes no count of other folks' likes or dislikes nor money either. If there was any choice you'd have said Miss Cathie was the beauty; though a gentleman, mind you, would always look twice at your mother for once at her. Just like my Alice, the one that passed away ten years come June. There she is, poor Alice too, leaning up against that marble banister. Now she went for a housemaid at Mr. Loxton's up to the Manor. Seventeen she was, and a poor pale little toad, never picked up rightly from the ear-complaint after the measles. You could never a'guessed she'd get married afore our Jane. Jane was a quiet one, like Miss Cathie. She came on later. And I always said that Miss Cathie had her eye on your father too . . ."

"Aunt Cathie?" Clare gasped.

"Three and a half minutes by the clock," said Thirza. "So now we're ready to pour out."

"Aunt Cathie?" Clare repeated. "Do you think Aunt Cathie was in love with him too?"

"Well, no, Miss Clare. I wouldn't say that. Miss Cathie was very upset, as was natural. Ah, she's a good girl, too, Miss

Cathie. Nobody but me and the doctor knows how good she is. Time after time she puts me in mind of my Lucy that died of the consumption. Poor soul, too! The doctor always said you could read it in her face. The eyes he'd got in those days! One look was enough for him. When first she took ill I had her up here for a bit. If anyone's going to cure her, I said, it's our doctor. But you couldn't make her take a morsel. Pecked and pecked like any bird. Port wine, he ordered her; but you might as well have gived her water for all the good it done in spite of keeping her in a warm room away from draughts. Now, Lucy, I used to say . . ."

So Clare sat and listened, casting her net into the flowing deeps of Mrs. Rudge's memory, holding, for a moment, some gleaming capture that flashed its sides and vanished into the dark current of older memories, memories, for the most part, of a youth and childhood incredibly remote which unfolded itself against the outline of savage western hills.

The hint of a thwarted passion on the part of Aunt Cathie troubled her. It explained so much. Even as the words escaped her Thirza had denied it; but if it were true . . . Clare had never thought of Aunt Cathie in any passionate relation. The picture filled her with a certain awe.

That evening, when she sat, as usual, reading aloud to her grandfather, whose eyes were now incapable of bearing the strain of lamplight, she became aware of Aunt Cathie poring over her frame on the other side of the fireplace, and found herself wondering, beneath the surface of meaningless words which her lips formed and emitted, into what strange ecstasies Aunt Cathie's heart might have flowered. For if father had married Aunt Cathie, she thought, Aunt Cathie would have been my mother: which seemed ridiculous, since Aunt Cathie

had never been anything, could never have been anything but Aunt Cathie, a figure so different in all its outlines from that of the tenuous and evanescent image of motherhood which she treasured. Aunt Cathie could not have satisfied this ghostly love. A wave of sentimental compassion, not only for Aunt Cathie but for all the inhabitants of Pen House, herself included, sent tears into her eyes, so that the print became dim and she stammered and stopped.

"What's that? What's that?" said the doctor.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought I was going to sneeze." Aunt Cathie looked up and smiled at her kindly. She's a darling, Clare thought. I don't love her nearly enough; I'm a selfish brute, that's what I am. She went on reading in a hurry: "The directors of Hingston's Ironworks intimated to the last general meeting that the eighteen ninety-six results would be unsatisfactory, and they now report that after providing five thousand pounds for depreciation, as they did in the last two balance sheets, that there was a loss of nine thousand one hundred and twenty-seven pounds."

"Too big for his boots," the doctor grunted. "Go on."

"They now report . . . oh, I'm sorry. The position is better, however, than it has been. The loss in the second part of the year was only three thousand and twenty pounds; and, better still, the aggregate value of orders in hand at the end of the year was more than double that of a year before. Important coal-mining developments are in progress . . ."

"Sedgebury Main!"

"... and in view of the general conditions of trade, which, in spite of the increase in German competition, show steady signs of improvement, the directors feel confident in proposing an issue of debenture shares to the extent of twenty thousand pounds."

"Huh, the man's mad," said the doctor. "Catherine, what did I tell Wilburn the other night? Is that all? Then you'd better ring for Thirza."

Clare sighed, folded the paper, and kissed him good-night. It seemed curious to her that evening how little this formal salutation meant. As the stubbles of the doctor's beard grazed her cheek she wondered if the old man really ever thought of her as anything but a normal encumbrance which couldn't be avoided. That evening, as she went to bed, she felt very lonely and strange.

6

MR. DARNAY

ONE day, tremulous but resolved, Clare went down to Wychbury and rang at the Vicarage door. Mr. Pomfret was out. She waited for over an hour in his study, a room that proclaimed his prowess as oarsman rather than as scholar or divine. At last he entered, in riding-kit, for he had hacked over to one of the last meets of the Woodland Stourton. Although he knew her by sight, he eyed Clare suspiciously. "I'm Dr. Weir's granddaughter," she said, "and I am anxious to be prepared for confirmation." "For confirmation?" he echoed, as though the word were unfamiliar to him. "Ah, yes, for confirmation. Quite so. Now let me see . . ." He rubbed his blue, shaven jowl with a massive hand, and begged her to sit down with the consideration that a Harrod or Whiteley might have shown to a customer who asked him personally for a yard of elastic.

"I think," he said at last, "that under the circumstances I had better give you a note to Mr. Darnay. He usually deals

with these matters for me." He sat down at his desk and wrote a letter, glancing at Clare from time to time, as if to assure himself that she was real. A retriever scratched at the door and was admitted. The diversion seemed to relieve him. The dog sniffed at his riding-breeches as he wrote. "I'll also speak to Mr. Darnay myself," he said, as he handed her the letter and showed her out. "Heel, Nell, heel! Good dog, then!"

Mr. Darnay was his curate. Clare found him living at the lower end of the village in rooms which seemed far more homely than the vicar's study. In one corner there was a Bechstein piano with Bach's "Matthew Passion" open at Erbarme mich. She was devouring it when Mr. Darnay entered: a gaunt, young man whose clothes hung loosely about an angular figure like garments on a clothes-horse. He had lank red hair and a long nose, like that of an ant-eater; his face was clean-shaven and blistered by the Spring sun; it went redder as he perused the vicar's letter.

"You are Dr. Weir's granddaughter?" he said; but when she admitted the damning circumstances he smiled: "A magnificent figure. I've seen him. A good man, too. Nobody could go about among the poor people in this parish without realizing that. I've often wished that I knew him, though in some things, I gather, we shouldn't agree. Not that this lessens my respect. Supposing we sit down and talk?"

They talked, and as they did so Clare felt curiously relieved of all the constraints that lay upon her at Pen House. She spoke of her life at St. Monica's, of Miss Boldmere, her music, her visits to St. Jude's. "A charming little church," said Mr. Darnay. "Father Shiplake and I were up at Oxford together." Not until the very end of their interview did Mr. Darnay make any mention of personal religion. Even then he spoke in passing, without impressiveness, as though the subject were one on which

they were so completely in agreement that no words from him were needed. His attitude put Clare at ease; it seemed so liberal, so human, so friendly, so free from any insistence on the solemnity of her mission or the sanctity of his. All those things were taken for granted as the assured basis of their friendship.

At parting he spoke more seriously.

"I wonder if your aunt and your grandfather know that you have come to see me?"

She admitted that they did not. He frowned; his pale eyes were fixed in vacancy.

"Do you think I ought to tell them?" she said.

He considered. "Perhaps, for the moment, you had better say nothing," he told her. "In the end, of course, your profession must be made public, and then, sooner or later you are bound to meet with opposition. Better, perhaps, later than sooner. At this stage there is no need to testify openly. The early Christians, even St. Peter and St. Paul, were forced to hide themselves in Roman catacombs. I don't think," he said, "you need even excite the general interest of the parish by going to church on Sundays. Every morning, at seven o'clock, I say Low Mass at St. Chad's. If you will come to hear me it will be far better than any formal preparation, though first, of course, you must make sure that you are in a state of Grace by performing the sacrament of Penance. Whenever you feel ready to make them, I will hear your confessions. To-morrow, half an hour before the Holy Sacrifice?"

He lent her a book which dealt with the process of preparation. Later he lent her music: that very copy of the "St. Matthew Passion" which she had seen open on his piano, and another of the great Mass in B Minor, in the gay Laudamus of which she seemed to find the expression of liberty and exultant youth that her mother's mid-Victorian fantasias and Miss Bold-

mere's Schwärmerei denied her. And solemnly she played to herself the mighty contrapuntal choruses which, as Mr. Darnay told her, rose like mountains of granite above the alpine meadows of the solos. The Broadwood was a poor, spent thing; yet, from its twanging strings grandeur flowed like a dark, slow-moving river on whose surface her soul was carried out to a vast sea that knew nothing of Pen House, nor Wychbury, nor even of Clare Lydiatt. Mr. Darnay had judged her well; his weak eyes had rightly probed the fluidity of her spirit and gauged the depth of her untroubled imagination. He found her fit for the annunciation of mysteries; his heart warmed to her.

Every morning, early, through the misty air of Spring, she walked over the fields to St. Chad's. There was no danger of discovery; the life of Pen House took its hours from the feebleness of her grandfather, who often fell into a doze at the time when other people were waking. The path to St. Chad's was familiar and beloved: past the mill, where Ellen's sweetheart worked, through flats of mare's-tail and king-cup steeped in moist, marshy odours. At this early hour the mill-pool lay tranced as in the quiet of evening. On its glassy flats the roach rose lazily with sucking dimples that spread to rings. Sometimes the burning blue of a kingfisher that haunted the willowroots passed with a flash that brought her heart into her mouth. Above the pool a field of cowslips. The low sun raked their pale clusters with a keener fire; their gusty vinous odour mounted to her brain. Then the edge of the larchwood, piercingly green, younger than anything on earth. Within its curved shadow dew lay late; the cropped turf was bloomed with it; and there, unconscious of her coming, crouched the little huddled shapes of rabbits nibbling against time. It was almost as if they could hear her smile. Suddenly the nibbling ceased; the warm bodies lav like scattered stones. One drummed with his

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feet, and all vanished with a clumsy, unhurried reluctance. They did not seem very much afraid of her. She was sorry that they mistrusted her at all. Couldn't they see, the silly things, that she loved them?

The little church took shelter under the hillside on a shelf of red soil bastioned by pagan vews. It cowered there, that fortress of an earlier faith, retired in timelessness, as removed from the tides of life that set southward down Severn, or northward toward the iron magnet of North Bromwich, as the standing stones on the summit of Pen beacon. That was how Mr. Darnay thought of it; for St. Chad, as he told Clare, was a Mercian Saint, an Englishman, as English as herself, canonized in the days when the Catholic Church in England still maintained the purity that Rome had bartered to the Franks. Mr. Darnay liked to think that the continuity of worship at St. Chad's had never been disturbed. Nobody from the outside world visited it but a few archæologists who stopped to stare at the Saint's grotesque image above the southern porch. Nobody in Wychbury took count of its existence but a few devout women who followed the older way under Mr. Darnay's guidance and a number of Nonconformists incensed by Mr. Darnay's practices. Certainly not the Vicar; for Mr. Pomfret was an aristocrat and a man of the world. As long as the bishop did not object there was no reason in the world why Mr. Darnay should not have his way. The ritual of a church, in his judgment, should conform to the ideas of its congregation. Wychbury was Latitudinarian, and so was he. St. Chad's was a nuisance in any case, and the people who went there could have what they liked. He only drew the line at incense, because it made his head ache. An odour of decadence, he called it, comparable in religious surroundings to that of patchouli in a theatre. Mr. Darnay was an admirable curate, who relieved him of the bulk of the parish

CLARE LYDIATT OF

work and allowed him to carry the odour of sanctity into the more exalted surroundings in which he was at home. As for the reservation of the Sacrament . . .

So, in St. Chad's, Mr. Darnay daily said Low Mass, and Clare, humbly hidden in the west-end among the woolly bellropes, came to hear it, compassing, in that short half-hour, the rarest emotional experience she had ever known. Why this was so she couldn't really say. Perhaps her generous nature demanded the sacrifice of some complete surrender. Mr. Darnay had given her minute instructions as to the state of mind in which each stage of the Sacrament should be received. In spirit, and to the letter, she obeyed them. From the moment when he passed with his long eager strides from the sacristy to the altar, carrying the vessels hidden by the chalice-veil, and removed his biretta, Clare concentrated all her thought upon the progress of the ritual. The Mass, Mr. Darnay had told her, celebrated a mystery in a series of symbolical acts. The thing that mattered was not so much what was said as what was done. He had begged her to dissociate him personally from the ceremony; and vet, since he was the celebrant, and since all the great acts of ritual were performed by him, she found it difficult to separate the idea of his personality from her devotions. In that little sanctuary his was the dominant figure. She could not subdue it. Even when she made her confession, in the form that he had taught her-to God, to the Blessed Mary, ever Virgin, to Blessed Michael, the Archangel, to all the Saints-the words: "and to thee, father," aroused in her an emotion more poignant than all the rest.

She knew that it was wrong of her. In any case this gaunt, red-haired young man with his sunburnt cheeks and high sloping forehead was a strange substitute for the handsome father whom she had never seen; yet she did not regret him; in place

of that lost guardian God had given her a new paternal love; she returned it with a piety which was more than filial. So, in the moist and stony odour of St. Chad's, she knelt and waited, with closed eyes, for those rare moments of exaltation: the summons of the Sanctus bell, the Consecration, the Elevation of Host and Chalice, the ceremony of Fraction and Commixture. So, when the Mass was ended, she passed out into the sounds and scents of the Spring morning, newly awakened and revivified, it seemed to her, by the passage of that sweet mystery. Coo-oop, coo-oop, coo-oop! Ellen's young man was calling up the cows. The busy cuckoo mimicked him. Joy and gladness. The God, she thought, who maketh glad my youth. Those words she carried in secret over the enchanted fields, alone, yet bringing with her all the company of heaven.

And nobody at Pen House guessed. Or rather nobody but Ellen, whose sweetheart saw Clare as she passed by the roachringed mill-pond. But Ellen did not tell Clare that she knew. Only in Ellen's attitude toward her there arose a new, mysterious comradeship which held them in long converse over the bed-making upstairs. Ellen could never have made a confidante of Aunt Cathie or Mrs. Rudge or anyone else in that house of age. It was Clare's youth and the sharing of a secret that drew her toward her. When once this freedom was attained Clare listened to her with a sort of tolerant wonder.

The idea of love, curiously aroused in her by the contemplation of her mother's story, held, as yet, no definite place in her thoughts. It did not thrill her to hear Ellen's hushed stories of kisses, of strained partings and long embraces. Her heart was full to overflowing with a rarer love. She couldn't, for instance, imagine Mr. Darnay in any passionate situation. Darnay himself had taught her that celibacy was the ideal state enjoined by the Apostle Paul and Christ himself. And yet, in the modest

ecstasies which Ellen confided to her, blushing above her folded sheets, she could not help feeling a gentle sympathy; not because she dreamed that Ellen's debased conception of love could ever mean anything to herself, but because, in that ecstatic Springtime, all life seemed so drenched in the spirit of love that her heart could not refuse to recognize its least manifestation. She saw that Ellen was happy, in some ways as happy as herself. And happiness, all happiness, was divine. Sometimes she felt that Ellen was telling her too much. Even though she was not competent to reject them, she felt herself compelled to put a brake on Ellen's enthusiasms. Then Ellen, reduced to silence, regarded her with a slow, subdued, confident smile.

"You wait a bit, Miss Clare," she said. "You wait a bit, and then you'll see for yourself."

"Oh, don't be silly," said Clare, blushing. Ellen shook her head.

7

MASS IN B MINOR

SO May passed into a dry and brilliant June, and always Clare was happy; but poor Aunt Cathie did not share her happiness. For her the seasons rolled on a relentless wheel. Bound to its felloe she was carried onward, hopelessly conscious of the approaching moment when its career would precipitate her into disaster. She told Clare nothing of these dark preoccupations; it was better that Clare should not know. In any case her growing anxiety for the doctor, over which she and Mrs. Rudge and Wilburn could shake heads together, was not to be shared with a creature so irresponsible as her niece. She was grateful to feel

that Clare had found out a way of life for herself, and was not adding to her troubles by making demands upon her interest or her time.

To her these dawns of early summer brought nothing but uneasiness and dread. Solemnly, each morning, she met, in the pier glass at the foot of the stairs, the image of her own strained face unsmoothed by sleep. She knew them so well, those features; daily she saw them reflected again in the puckered eyes of Thirza. With a sinking dread she knocked at the doctor's door; and when, impatiently, he called for her to enter, the reassurance that she felt when she heard his living voice was shattered by the frailty that she saw before her.

During the last few months the texture of Dr. Weir's gaunt body seemed to have changed; it was translucent, like a figure of brittle, delicate porcelain; blanched, like a growth to which light has been denied. Beneath his overhanging brows the eves burned with remote, inhuman blackness; his pugnacious mouth pushed itself forward as if in it were concentrated the whole of his will to live. And, as his body weakened and grew cold, his mind seemed to glow with a more condensed, malicious brightness, as though it had succeeded in consuming the physical burden by which it had been stifled. All the old tenderness which had shown itself in the first days of his surrender was gone. Together with human weakness, that spirit, almost disembodied. seemed to have rid itself of human sympathies. It stood out naked and untrammelled, no longer a man but an intelligence free to assert itself in unreasonable prejudice and ruthless reasoning.

Aunt Cathie schooled herself to bear with him. At times the task seemed impossible. She could not look for sympathy to Mrs. Rudge, for Thirza, though equally a victim, was less sensitive than herself. She had no longer any friends in Wychbury; for

with the doctor's retirement she had acquiesced in the isolation that his illness demanded, and misunderstanding had estranged them.

Clare could not share her troubles. The whole of a generation, and more than a generation, lay between them. Aunt Cathie had no friend in the world but Dudley Wilburn; and though Wilburn's visits were rare and brief, she made the most of them. To him she confided the most of her misery. He listened gravely, and with that air of respect and gallantry which had changed her outlook on life when first he came. With his hand on her arm he gave her brotherly counsel, which was only part of what she needed; he praised her, he flattered her, and yet she sometimes felt that his sympathy was that of the tactful lawyer rather than of the human being whose sympathy she so passionately desired.

"I'm not sure you don't exaggerate," he said. "Of course he's weaker; but his mind, you know, is extraordinarily clear."

"It's not the clearness of his mind," she tried to explain to him. "It's the nature of it. Can't you see that he's different? He's a sort of changeling, not a bit like himself, different from the father I've always loved."

He couldn't see it. "I think the change is in yourself," he said. "You're worn out. I'm not surprised at that. And yet, honestly, I don't see why he shouldn't go on for a year or two like this. You ought to be proud of it. It's you who have made it possible."

"Sometimes I wish it were over," she said. "Ah, there you are! Now you're shocked at me. You think I'm inhuman. But I can't go on much longer. I can't. I know I can't."

"I'll tell him I think you ought to go away for a bit. You're on the edge of a breakdown. There's no reason, under the circumstances, why you shouldn't get a nurse in."

"Oh no, no, no!" she cried. "For heaven's sake don't say

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anything. It's really nothing but silly weakness. I shall be all right to-morrow. You see . . . I suppose it's just the fact of having somebody to speak to. It's a relief; you've been too sweet to me; only—I don't know—I simply can't stand it."

"What about Clare!" he said suddenly.

At that word her self-control melted away in the disconcerting, blinding manner which had lately puzzled her. If anyone else had suggested Clare's possibilities she wouldn't, probably, have minded; but on Wilburn's lips the name had power to wound. In its inflection she detected a tenderness that enraged her and tumbled together in a cumulative rush of memory all the occasions for grudging or jealousy that she had so rigidly repressed: Clare's youth, her music, her happiness, Sylvia. A hundred times, by sheer force of suggestion, she had convinced herself that she didn't grudge Clare anything; now, under the scrutiny of Wilburn's straight blue eyes, she knew that she did, and was less ashamed than angry, for, in the same moment, she realized that however skilfully he might flatter her or she might flatter herself, this man cared nothing for her . . . nothing. She had to find words to show her unconcern.

"Oh, Clare's no good," she said. "Clare's nothing but a child."

Still the vindictive memory pursued her. In these very words, once before, Wilburn had made excuse for Clare, and she had contradicted him. Would he remember? He left her in doubt, with an embarrassed laugh. Confused and suffering she led him without another word to the doctor's room. She wondered, hopelessly, how it was that Clare, in her innocence, should always show her at her worst. At any rate she need deceive herself no longer. Now she suspected that the magnet which drew Wilburn so often and so dutifully to Pen House was not respect for her

father or regard for herself, but Clare's youth, Clare's passive beauty.

From that moment she forgot her preoccupations over the old man's health, the agony of self-pity which she had disclosed for Wilburn's sympathy, in an intense examination of Clare and Wilburn as they sat together at the supper table. She watched them in vain. Not a word, not a glance that passed between them betrayed as much as his earlier question had given her. But this did not satisfy her. That night, deliberately, she denied herself the treasured privilege of seeing Wilburn to the door. "Clare had better see you off," she said. If he wanted the foolish child he should have her. It was a triumph. It proved, as nothing else could have proved, that she wasn't jealous; and Clare assented with an easy, bright naturalness that would have deceived any woman less acute than herself. When they had gone she sat staring in front of her, intently listening; and not a sound reached her but the sharp slam of the hall-door. Which was worse than ever.

For the next few days she threw herself into an artificial fury of activity, embarrassing to Mrs. Rudge and Ellen, who were used to the routine of a house that ran like clockwork, and mildly astonishing to Clare. It was only by incessant occupation that Aunt Cathie could subdue her agitated mind. She embarked on a second spring-cleaning that swept the house like a whirlwind from end to end, sparing neither herself nor Clare nor the bewildered servants.

"This morning," she told Clare with a peculiar satisfaction, "I'm going to 'do' the drawing-room, so you'll have to give up your piano-playing for once."

Clare found herself enrolled in the forces of invasion that stripped the walls of pictures and furniture, revealing grotesque

unfaded patches of the figured paper that were like ghosts of the shapes that had been torn from them. Finally, with a swoop of exultation, Aunt Cathie pounced upon the contents of the ebony music-cupboard. Red, dusty, flustered, she stood above the piles of music that it disgorged.

"This cabinet," she said, "has never been cleaned properly since before you were born. It's a perfect scandal. You'd think we had no servants in the house. All this old rubbish"—she pointed to the yellow sheets of Clare's mother's collection—"it's no business here. It ought to go up into the attic instead of breeding dust and moths and spiders."

It was a challenge, and Clare accepted it.

"But Aunt Cathie," she said, "I love these old things of mother's. I often play them."

"I know you do. I've heard you. Haven't you got music of your own? This stuff is nothing but a silly waste of time. You'd better put them all together, Ellen, and carry them upstairs," she added, returning to her old trick of suggesting that Clare disliked doing things for herself. "Now do, for heaven's sake, pull yourself together, Clare. Don't stand gaping at them like that!"

But Clare's spirit was roused. Her eyes brightened. She knew that she must assert herself.

"You can do what you like with your own music, Aunt Cathie," she said, "but mother's is mine, and I want it."

For a moment the issue hung undecided. Ellen stood sheepishly waiting in the background. Clare crouched protectively over the beloved pages. Aunt Cathie hovered, a bird of prey waiting to strike. Then, abruptly, she changed her mind.

"There's no need to be dramatic about it," she said. "At any rate you might take the trouble to keep the cupboard dusted. Moth-eggs! Cobwebs! Really . . ." She threw her energies

wildly on the lower shelf where Clare's own music reposed. She picked out an armful and flung it in a heap on the floor-boards, as though she hated every sheet. Then an unfamiliar title caught her eye. "Mass in B Minor?" she gasped. "Mass in B Minor? What are you doing with Masses, pray? Where did you get this from?" She snatched up the volume before Clare could lay hands on it. Destruction was in her eye.

"Give it to me," Clare cried. "It's mine, it's mine!"

It wasn't hers; yet it was hers a thousand times.

"Yours?" Aunt Cathie sneered. "Then what's the meaning of this? Michael Darnay. You needn't lie to me, Clare."

"I'm not lying," Clare protested. "I mean that it goes with my music. Of course it belongs to Mr. Darnay."

"Then what are you doing with it?"

"He lent it to me."

"Mr. Darnay? I'd no idea that you were acquainted with him. I don't know Mr. Darnay and don't want to know him. Perhaps you'll kindly explain."

"You've no right to ask me, Aunt Cathie."

"No right? My dear Clare . . ."

"No right at all. But I'll tell you all the same. Mr. Pomfret sent me to him when I told him I wanted to be prepared for Confirmation."

"Mr. Pomfret? Mr. Pomfret? My dear child, I think you must be mad. You know perfectly well how we're situated. Do you want to kill your grandfather?"

Aunt Cathie always said that when she wanted to be most impressive.

"Oh, Aunt Cathie, don't be silly!" Clare said. "You know you needn't tell him unless you want to."

But Aunt Cathie was determined to be silly. She swept across the room toward the fireplace and possessed herself of a fan of moth-eaten peacock's feathers which she swished through the air like an angry bird spreading its tail.

"I don't know this Mr. Darnay personally," she went on, "but I've heard enough about him to form an opinion. These rubbishy feathers ought to be thrown away. Full of moths and dust. Besides, they say they're unlucky. Mr. Pomfret, indeed! Mr. Pomfret ought to have known better than to send you to a Romanizer, a Papist, who hasn't the courage to 'go over.' A bachelor, too. That's a fine thing to do with a young girl! I know that Mr. Darnay is a great favourite with the women. No doubt he enjoys their confessions. Spiritual flirtations: that's what I call them."

"Aunt Cathie," Clare cried, "I won't allow you to speak about him like this!"

"You'll have to, my dear." And Cathie spoke with a bitter laugh. "Now don't excuse yourself. You know as well as I do how scandalously Mr. Poinfret has behaved to your grandfather. You know that we, in this house, have nothing, absolutely nothing to do with him. You know what our opinions are, how strongly the doctor feels; and when he's on his dying bed off you go, sneaking over to the other side. You must be mad. You're not a member of the Church of England."

"But I am, Aunt Catnie! That's where you make a mistake. Whether you like it or not, I was baptized into it. At Stourton, where I'm going to be confirmed next week."

"Confirmed?" Aunt Cathie spluttered. "Confirmed?"

She began to pat her chest nervously, as though by this method of correction she could reduce her heart to order. Evidently it had the effect that she desired; for, when next she spoke, it was with a grim and injured resignation:

"Please go and see what Ellen is doing," she said, "and tell her to come here at once. You needn't bother to come back again. We can manage perfectly well without you."

Clare went, carrying the precious music with her. Aunt Cathie was standing alone in the midst of the dismantled room, with the moth-eaten fan of peacock's feathers in her hand. Her heart was so hot with irritation and resentment that, if there had been a chair, she could have sat down and cried. She knew that it was unreasonable; she knew that she was powerless to bend or break Clare. The child was a match for her, fashioned out of the same hard stuff as the doctor and herself. The only thing which could console her was a just indignation that she, an older woman, to whom Clare owed a kind of filial submission had been scorned and insulted; and even here she could not be quite sure of her ground.

Ellen, with a scared face, returned. They worked together in a dreadful, tense silence. Dust was in Aunt Cathie's eyes and throat. A blackbird, on the lawn, mocked her with the delicious ease of its song. Clare had got out of this dusty turmoil far too easily. Clare was in her high, cool bedroom, or in the garden, lazy as a blackbird. As usual! That was the root of the whole trouble. The child had not enough to do. She'd been running wild. Running wild. Whatever the words might mean, they gave Aunt Cathie a partial satisfaction. She knew that all her life had been one long sacrifice. Clare had never made a sacrifice of any kind since she was born. That was the trouble. Running wild!

And as for Mr. Pomfret . . . Why, only that week, she had felt herself compelled to refuse one of the Vicar's overtures! This Diamond Jubilee that everyone was raving about. Mr. Pomfret had written her a friendly letter, a letter so friendly that it could only be regarded with suspicion, inviting her to serve on the Ladies' Committee which was to arrange the Jubilee festivities in Wychbury. She had wanted, most aw-

fully, to serve on this Committee; it didn't look well for a person of her importance to abstain from it. Yet, out of consideration for the doctor's feelings, she had refused. She had made her usual sacrifice, only to discover that Clare, behind her back, had entered the enemy's camp.

It would serve Clare right if she abandoned her springcleaning, or left it in Ellen's bungling hands, and went straight in to the doctor to tell him of this vile perfidy. She hesitated to do so: partly because, although she knew it wouldn't kill him as she had extravagantly suggested, he would be upset, and partly because life was already too complicated to admit the disturbance of a scene. She tried to put the idea of this obvious and easy revenge out of her mind; but when, that evening, she sat over her work exhausted with the day's activities, when she heard Clare reading to the doctor in Sylvia's voice, and saw, in Clare's, the mild reproachfulness of Sylvia's eyes, the desire to wound, to crush, to humiliate, gathered in her body like a storm and made her fingers tremble.

Quivering she rose from her chair and came to the old man's elbow.

"Father," she said, "I think you ought to know what Clare has been doing."

"What's this? What's this?" said the doctor. "What's the matter now?"

He looked from one to the other with the eyes of an animal disturbed in the middle of a meal, for the teeth of his mind were already fixed in Sedgebury Main Preference. And Clare stood before them in the composure of a mute humility, with a cool, pale quietness that was worse to Aunt Cathie than any scarlet of indignation. It spurred her into ruthlessness!

"I think you ought to know, father," she said, "that Clare has got into the hands of our friend, the Vicar. That Mr. Dar-

nay has been preparing her for Confirmation. She's going to be confirmed in Stourton this week."

The doctor's eyes glittered savagely. Aunt Cathie stood waiting for the sky to crack and fall. It did not fall. From his thin lips and nose there issued a sound that was between a snort and a laugh.

"Ha! To be confirmed? What else do you expect, Catherine? Like father, like daughter. Ha?"

Not another word.

"I thought you ought to know," Aunt Cathie weakly repeated. "Ring for Thirza," the doctor snarled.

She hurried to the bell. She heard it tinkle in the kitchenpassage. Even that futile sound seemed a relief, for, though Clare had not spoken, she knew that Clare's eyes were on her, and that this silence concealed a reproach that would never be spoken. She deserved it. She was so ready to admit her baseness that she accused herself without pity of meanness and disloyalty. to Clare, to herself, to her sex. And as she waited awkwardly for the relief of Mrs. Rudge's arrival another question troubled her: What would Dudley Wilburn think of it? Once again the dreadful passive power that was in Clare had compelled her to humiliate herself in Wilburn's eyes. There was no peace, no happiness in life since Clare's return; she was no longer mistress of herself; some spiteful devil possessed her. And once again her soul cried for the revelation of some means by which she could make amends; if that were possible, if Clare could ever forgive her. Even now she could not calculate the consequences of her betrayal.

The first of these was easily to be anticipated. Next morning, when she met Clare at breakfast with troubled, penitent eyes, she realized that she had lost the child's confidence for ever, that all the pretences of sisterly love and intimacy which

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duty and desire had compelled her to imagine had been swept away. She knew at once that the shamed tenderness which she was prepared to offer would be rejected; that the melting reconciliation, which she had planned as a preface to begging Clare not to tell Wilburn what had happened, was out of the question.

What troubled her even more was the uncertainty of the doctor's attitude. She knew that he had fiercely approved her rejection of Mr. Pomfret's overtures in the matter of the Jubilee fête; indeed, she had extracted virtuous satisfaction from his approval; she wondered in what light he would consider Clare's defection.

She need not have worried herself. On the surface, at any rate, his behaviour toward Clare was, as usual, that of an impassionate patriarch performing his bare duty toward the stranger within his gates. He was too old, too careful, too absorbed in cold calculations, to show the active intolerance of his middle-age. Only, as a whimsical penance for Clare's heterodoxy, it now amused him to inflict on her, in the intervals between pages of the Financial Times, the reading of those old destructive, sceptical writings which had inspired his youth, and a new book which curiously fitted the occasion. It was called The Secret Records of the Oxford Movement, a spirited, and occasionally lubricious attack on the activities of Mr. Darnay's kind.

Clare read this exposure aloud from cover to cover. The old man spared her nothing. She read of the scandalous indecencies of the confessional, the lusts of celibate priests, the enormities practised in the convents of Protestant sisterhoods. The doctor grunted over them and licked his lips; for they confirmed his theory that all mystical religions were nothing but manifestations of sexual suppressions. Aunt Cathie sat listening in her chair and

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blushed. This torture, if torture it was meant to be, recoiled upon her, its instigator, rather than on Clare. For Clare did not understand.

All through those first blue days of summer, when wild hyacinths flooded the copses and apple-blossom swept, like the foam of a tidal wave, up the basin of the Severn sea, Aunt Cathie was forced to endure the reproach which she imagined in Clare's quiet eyes. There was no reproach in them; for Clare had soon forgiven her. In the overflow of joy and serenity which her confirmation had given her she could not help being at peace with all the world. Her happiness separated her from the older woman more surely than any enmity could have done. The gates of her heart lay open; but Aunt Cathie would not enter, and Clare could never imagine why. She thought, in her new humility, that she herself must be at fault, never realizing that what Aunt Cathie's shyness demanded was a particular occasion, a full-dress setting for the act of reparation and forgiveness.

It came, and from an unexpected quarter, in one of the heavy square envelopes which Lady Hingston had affected since her translation to Stourford Castle; an invitation for the Misses Weir and Lydiatt to be present at a dance to be held at Stourford on the evening of Jubilee Day. It was many years since an invitation of this kind had reached Pen House. When Clare came down to breakfast it was prominently displayed on the dining-room mantelpiece, a gleaming white copper-plate pasteboard, surmounted, like the cards that summon to municipal luncheons, by an embossed crest. Aunt Cathie, who usually acquiesced in the doctor's depreciation of the Hingstons as social climbers, was visibly flattered. With a carefully modulated satisfaction she showed it to Clare.

"But how awfully nice of them," Clare said. "I wonder what made them think of asking us?"

"My dear child," said Aunt Cathie, bridling, "on an occasion of this kind they couldn't very well leave us out. Please remember that the Weirs are a much better and older family than the Hingstons. We've been here, in Wychbury, for hundreds and hundreds of years. Sir Joseph Hingston's father was only a collier from Halesby. I've heard that Sir Joseph himself worked as a boy in the Great Mawne pit."

Clare scarcely heard this vindication of family pride. She was thinking how Ralph Hingston had smiled and waved to her on the platform at Stourton a few months before. He had promised to speak to his sister Vivien about her. She wondered if this invitation were the result of that promise. In any case she couldn't grudge Aunt Cathie the pleasure of a little self-flattery.

"Of course," Aunt Cathie was saying, "at a house of that kind the company's bound to be very mixed. Since my day there are a lot of people in Stourton and the district who go everywhere. People that the doctor would never have let us know. He hasn't been able to reconcile himself to the changes of the last ten years."

"And in any case," said Clare, wistfully, "we couldn't go, could we?"

"Naturally, I couldn't," said Aunt Cathie, "even if I wanted to. Lady Hingston must have known that perfectly well. But I don't see any real reason why you shouldn't."

"Oh, Aunt Cathie, how nice of you!" said Clare.

"Your dancing-lessons were an expensive extra. It seems a pity that they should be wasted. This is the first chance you've had of using them."

"I don't quite see how I could go alone," said Clare.

"Of course you couldn't go alone. My dear child, what are you thinking about?"

"I wasn't thinking about it. That's what I said."

"Though in these days," said Aunt Cathie, scraping the surface of cinder from a piece of Ellen's toast, "young people are allowed a licence such as we never dreamed of. Still, I think it can be managed. You see Mr. Wilburn is bound to be invited. He's their solicitor. He's coming over to-night, and I shall take the opportunity of asking him if he'll be kind enough to take you with him. It's bound to be a late affair, so it might suit him to dress here and come back to sleep afterwards. Jabez could drive you."

"Oh, that's a wonderful idea," said Clare. "How clever of you to think of it! I should love to go with Mr. Wilburn," she added tactlessly.

"No doubt you would," said Aunt Cathie, bridling. "The only question is whether Mr. Wilburn would love to go with you."

A question that Clare thought she could have answered; but already another was troubling her.

"I'm afraid I haven't got a dress that will do," she said.
"Only the white silk. That's high in the neck, you know, and dreadfully short. I'm really awful: I seem to grow out of everything."

"I've thought about that too," said Aunt Cathie, making her penance stage by stage with bitter satisfaction. "As a matter of fact we have a lot of your mother's things in the house. You're very much her figure. Fashions have changed, of course, but you can always do things with lace, and lace always looks good. Thirza and I will see what we can do about it. Now, my dear child, don't get excited about it like that! There's plenty of time to spare. You can't even answer the invitation until you're sure that Mr. Wilburn will put up with you."

"But it is sweet of you, Auntie Cathie," said Clare.

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She threw her arms round Aunt Cathie's neck and kissed her. Catherine Weir blushed and trembled as though her kisses had been those of a lover. She swallowed hard, to keep down the emotion which her penance, and, even more, Clare's generous acceptance of it, had given her. She was so embarrassed and disorganized that, without thinking, she put sugar into Clare's second cup of tea. And Clare, who hated sugar in anything, restored the balance of indebtedness by swallowing it without telling her what she had done.

8

JUBILEE

A MORNING of sultry skies and moist, veiled sunshine; a torrid afternoon, dispersed, at evening, into a uniform haze of gold. Queen's weather, they called it, as though the empire of that august lady had mystically asserted itself over the cyclonic systems of the North Atlantic. The morning had been lazy as a Sunday, till, of a sudden, the bells of Wychbury broke out into an orgy of clashing bob-majors that made the air rock and eddy below the terrace of Pen House.

As a rule the octave of Wychbury bells, beautiful as they were in their faint discordance, had the power of filling Clare with a vague unhappiness. On still Thursday evenings, when Mr. Hemus, in his shirt-sleeves, led the ringers' practices, the wavering peal enveloped Pen House in a melancholy veil of sound from which she felt that she could never escape. But that morning the bells spoke with a gay and leaping exultation that made her heart dance with them. Their voices made an airy maze, soaring and wheeling dizzily above the steeple like swifts

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on a summer evening, while beneath them, in the quivering heathaze that wrapped the Severn Plain, the bells of other villages hummed, throbbed and trembled like a bourdon of bumblebees in the lime-blossom.

From her bedroom window Clare could see the red-striped sail-cloth of the marquees that had been erected in the field behind Mr. Pomfret's Vicarage; and from this point, later in the day, arose a babel of human voices no less exultant than that of the bells, as the programme of sports and competitions, athletic or merely ludicrous, which Mr. Pomfret had arranged for the occasion, developed itself.

For, after fox-hunting, the principal tenet of Mr. Pomfret's creed was Merrie England; which meant that on certain chosen occasions, everybody in the parish, except himself and the landed gentry, should be induced to make themselves ridiculous in some way or other. "No shirkers, now!" said Mr. Pomfret. On his face was the same grim smile with which he put his hunter at a "bullfinch."

Ellen, of course, was there, with her young sweetheart from the mill. Even Thirza Rudge had been induced to spend the day with Mrs. Harbord, who kept the sweetshop in the village. Thirza made a rule of never mentioning Mrs. Harbord's name. Almost as if there were something indecent about it, she invariably veiled Mrs. Harbord's identity under the title of "my friend"; Jabez also had been released for the occasion; and when Clare watched him hobble away down the drive with an old straw hat of his master's cocked on his head, she realized that she and Aunt Cathie and the doctor were to be left alone.

So evening came; and still the waves of sound welled upward from the Vicarage field. Now dancing had begun; the village band, in which Ellen's young man sweated beneath the weight of a euphonium, had jerked itself into the rhythm of You

should see me dance the Polka. Clare and Aunt Cathie sat out on the terrace in a golden haze of midges, not so much because they wanted to hear as because they could not separate themselves wilfully from all the normal human activities of the festival.

The doctor insisted on joining them; it was the first time that he had left the house that year. Between them they helped him out into the garden. Clare had never been allowed to do this before; for he was fanciful, and always reserved the privilege for Aunt Cathie and Mrs. Rudge. It affected her strangely to feel the pressure of his skinny arm upon her hand; for though she knew that he was thin she had always associated his thinness with a sort of steely strength, and now the arm which she supported seemed fragile and brittle, like that of a plaster cast. Its age and fragility awed her heart with mingled pity and reverence, making her guiltily conscious of her own youth. When they had settled him on the terrace in his chair he looked very grey and weary. Not even that warm evening sun could give his face the colour of life; he couldn't even hear the blaring of the village band, and, after a little while, he settled down in his chair and nodded asleep.

Clare and Aunt Cathie sat by him for a long time in silence, and Clare, looking from one face to the other, saw, for the first time, how sinister in its admonitions of age and mortality a family likeness might be. Their presence made her youth seem an indecency of which she ought to be ashamed; she wished that she could conceal the excitement that ran in her blood, the eagerness with which her thoughts kept racing toward her new frock and the Stourford party; and though she kept on wondering if she oughtn't really to go upstairs and begin dressing, the implied indelicacy kept her from asking Aunt Cathie what time it was: a foolish deference, as she told herself afterward; for

when she could stand it no longer and slipped quietly away, Aunt Cathie's eyes followed her with a smile of encouragement.

Now all the fields warmed to a golden hue, barred by the long, blue shadows of elms; but in Clare's little bedroom the light had almost gone, for the casement was narrow and oldfashioned, and the dome of a pale, soft-breathing lime stood between it and the West. In this half-light the room took on a scented, shining mystery of its own; for all its air was full of summer perfume, of lime flower, of roses, of lavender; and the bright, dark surfaces of the mirror, the Sheraton mahogany dressing-table, the tall chest of drawers reflected a lucent richness in which all their imperfections of age were lost. The dusk which filled it was as profound and peaceful as that of a quiet sky at night, deeply, infinitely, mysteriously removed from all earthly turmoil; and when Clare lighted the two Sheffieldplated candlesticks, one on either side of the mirror, their thin flames burned with the unwavering steadfastness of stars. The air was so still and sweet that when she took off her frock and stood with bare shoulders, its milky coolness made her shudder with such sensuous delight that she felt she could have surrendered herself for ever to its caresses.

On the blue coverlet of the bed lay the dress which Aunt Cathie had skilfully compounded from lace that had once belonged to Sylvia, ivory-white with age. Clare knew already that it was lovely; but when she slipped it over her shoulders and saw, in the mirror, framed by sky, the delicate, insubstantial beauty with which it invested her own dark, glowing youth, she stood rapt in amazement. She could not believe that she, Clare Lydiatt, was really like this. Rather some ghostly visitant stood and mocked her from the mirror's shining oval.

She was standing rapt in this contemplation when she became aware of another face, dark, handsome, with black eyes, invad-

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ing the corner of the picture behind her left shoulder. Aunt Cathie had stolen into the room, so quietly that she, too, seemed part of the same ghostly evocation. She looked, and spoke not a word, until Clare suddenly awakened, and flushed, like a dark rose, with confusion.

"Oh, Aunt Cathie," she said, "how you startled me! Will I do?"

"Yes, Clare, I think you'll do very well." She spoke in her low, hard voice as usual. "Of course you can't go very far wrong with old lace like this. It's a little bit discoloured; but that doesn't really matter. Anyone can see that it's good. Now do keep still a moment, child. Don't wriggle like that! I think the waist-line should be the very least bit higher. You see? Just like that."

She stepped back and surveyed Clare with her cold, dark seriousness. "Of course the neck is rather low; lower than you're used to. You must be careful not to sit in draughts after you've been dancing: I don't want to have two invalids in the house. Let's see . . . There's a Honiton lace scarf. That'll be most appropriate: the Queen always wears Honiton. You'd better have that as well."

She took a key from her silver chatelaine and unlocked the mysterious bottom drawer of Clare's chest, the one which was devoted to her mother's belongings. She threw the scarf over Clare's shoulders; the fine net lay like gossamer on her white neck.

"Yes, that's much better," said Aunt Cathie in a measured voice. The two stood facing each other. Clare's lips trembled into a smile of pleasure and new excitement; but as she smiled she saw Aunt Cathie's mouth stiffen curiously at the corners, saw her dark eyes go brighter. Suddenly she found herself in Aunt Cathie's arms, bound fast in a passionate embrace. Against

her burning cheek lay Aunt Cathie's, downy and lax. She heard Aunt Cathie's softened, broken voice:

"Clare, my darling, my little Clare!"

Aunt Cathie began to cry softly. She seemed so lonely, help-less, broken, with all the pride and hardness in her abased, that Clare, too, melted into tears. Against her own soft shoulder she felt the rigidity of Aunt Cathie's whalebone stays; she gathered Aunt Cathie to her breast as though the sobbing woman were a child, and she, Clare, her natural protectress. There was no longer any reservation or doubt or grudging in her mind, no smallest resentment in her heart, not even pity: only love. . . .

But she could not speak. And fortunately there was no need for speaking. They heard a gentle tap at the door. Aunt Cathie, swiftly, shamefully, released herself from Clare's embrace. She went to the door and opened it, and Ellen, her face as red as if it had been kissed all day, entered with the tray on which Clare's supper had been arranged. In her bunched white muslin she looked like some profuse bouquet of country flowers. Breathless with haste and excitement she burst into a spate of apologies.

"Oh, Miss Cathie, m'm, I'm that sorry I gave you the trouble to open the door. My hands were in such a tremble I didn't dare put down the tray. I've run all the way up from the field; there's not a breath in my body. But I said I'd bring up Miss Clare's tray—didn't I, Miss?—and I've done it!" She laughed nervously. "Shall I put it down on the bed, Miss Cathie, m'm? Yes, m'm? Oh, Miss Clare! Oh, my, Miss! Aren't you lovely! Ain't she a sight, Miss Cathie, m'm? Oh, ain't she a picture?"

"That will do, Ellen," said Aunt Cathie, smiling, with the remains of emotion in her voice. "You'd better hurry back, or you'll miss the fire balloons. I think I'll bring a lamp up,

Clare. You can't see to eat with candles in this light."

She took this opportunity of escaping from the room; but Ellen, in spite of Jim Moseley and the fire balloons, still lingered in a rapt ecstatic admiration of Clare.

"Oh, Miss Clare, if only you knew how sweet you looked. I've got to do it. I knew I'd got to do it when first I set eyes on you; you properly took my breath away. You wouldn't make any objection, Miss, would you, if I made so bold as to kiss you?"

Clare laughed. The evening was full of kisses. Ellen's moist, hot hands were on her arms as she kissed the shining peony of Ellen's face. Then they stood for a second smiling at each other and Ellen was gone.

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MUSIC AND MOONLIGHT

THE musty victoria jolted Clare and Dudley Wilburn through the lanes. On the box above them, a seedy, shrunken figure, old Jabez sat with more than his usual taciturnity, drowsy already, with the effects of Diamond Jubilee beer. The moon, in its last quarter, had not yet risen, but under the mild starlight, clouds of creamy hawthorn tufted the hedges, drenching the lanes with the perfume of their decadence, paving the ruts with a drift of rusty ivory. For half an hour and more these scented tunnels led them insensibly to the level of the plain, and through all that time Wilburn, seated at Clare's side, so close that her shoulder touched his arm, had neither stirred nor uttered a single syllable.

It puzzled her to find him so silent. She could not help remembering their last drive together up from the station when he had joked with her in his elderly privileged way, and made her thrill with a deeper emotion at her mother's name. It seemed that his mood had changed from the moment at which Aunt Cathie had waved good-bye to them at the end of the drive. "Now, mind you look after her!" Aunt Cathie had called; and Wilburn had laughed back at her: "Don't you trust me?"

Since that moment never a single word. It was curious, but, as Clare quickly decided, rather nice of him. She had no great experience out of which to make comparisons; Mr. Darnay was the only other man with whom she had known any intimacy, and her intimacy with Mr. Darnay, apart from the moments when his musical enthusiasms made his prominent pale eyes shine behind their spectacles, ruffled his red hair, and brought an irritating moisture to the corners of his mouth, had been limited to an earnest examination of religious tradition.

And yet, after a while, Wilburn's silence troubled her. The impulses of her own heart were so mercurial that this suspension of all physical activity made her feel as if she had been gagged and strapped in her seat. At last she could bear it no longer. Before she knew what she was saying she had spoken.

"Why don't you say something, Mr. Wilburn?" she said.

The words had no sooner left her mouth than she realized their childishness. For a moment he didn't answer; but, in the dark, she was aware of his smile. Then he spoke in his deep, rumbling voice, so low down in his chest that it always reminded her of a double bass:

"What do you want me to say, Clare?"

"I don't know. It seems so funny, saying nothing."

"I was thinking of a great many things," he said.

"I don't consider that you ought to think on a night like this," she told him.

"Of course you don't. And it's perfectly right that you

shouldn't. Nobody has any right to think when they're eighteen. I'm sorry I'm such dull company, Clare. Still, you'll find plenty of young people at Stourford."

"I do wish you wouldn't always talk as if you were ninety," she said, "because you know, perfectly well, that you aren't."

"I know perfectly well that I am . . . very nearly. That's the whole trouble. I'm a very shy man, Clare. And when I find myself in the company of anyone so alarmingly young as yourself, I can't help feeling the enormous difference between us. You're rather rubbing it in, you know, by what you said just now. It would be much kinder to leave me alone."

"But I don't think it would be kinder," Clare protested. She was taking him very seriously. "Because . . . you see, I think it's rather silly of you. I don't think you ought to be encouraged. It isn't natural."

He laughed: "Do you want me to be natural? No, no. It's much better that I shouldn't be, though I'm very glad that you are. And now, my child, you'd better pull yourself together. It's your last chance. By Jove, what a blaze of light they've got! Sir Joseph must be wanting to show off his new electric installation. Think what it means to be a millionaire! Now don't get excited before there's any need for it. Keep quiet and dignified. Just imagine for a moment that you're your Aunt Cathie!" He laid a firm, restraining hand upon her knee. "Now, I suppose I'd better say good-bye to you. I shan't see you again. When you've had enough of it, you'll find me with the other chaperons in the library playing whist."

"But aren't you going to dance?" Her voice was alarmed. "Oh, Mr. Wilburn, please, please don't leave me alone. Really and truly I shan't know anyone but the Hingstons and the Willises. I shall be simply lost if you leave me."

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"You won't be anything of the sort. Lady Hingston will look after you, if you can't look after yourself. And of course you can."

"But I'm frightened to death of her!" Clare gasped.

"So am I, my dear. But she can't hurt you. Then there's Vivien."

"Vivien's so dreadfully smart. She won't look at me."

"If she won't, her brother will. Let me get out first. Be careful of that lace scarf now! Come along. You'd better take my arm."

"But, truly, Mr. Wilburn . . ."

It was too late. The door of the wide entrance hall stood open with a footman on either side of it. No sooner had Clare entered than she was swept into a long room on the left where a tall, gaunt, elderly lady with grey hair and long yellow teeth stood in front of a pier glass, plunging hairpins viciously into her high coiffure, wincing at every thrust as if the points had entered her scalp. Her eyes glared fiercely at the figure of Clare reflected in the mirror. Then of a sudden, her mouth twitched into a smile, like that of a horse baring its teeth; her hair began to nod like a tossing plume. Only after a moment did Clare realize that the smile and the tossing of the crest were made in recognition of herself, and that the lady was Mrs. Pomfret, the Vicar's wife, whom she had only seen before in the rigour of black satin on Sundays.

"So glad to see you! Miss Lydiatt, isn't it? My husband told me. A great pleasure to both of us. Dreadfully late, I'm afraid."

And with another bony smile she galloped out, leaving Clare to the empty magnificence of the dressing-room, strewn with rich cloaks and saturated by strange sophisticated perfumes. Never before had she felt so lonely and helpless. The rumour of laughter and voices that penetrated the closed door through

which Mrs. Pomfret had boldly curvetted, sounded to her so easy, so masterful, so awfully confident, that she doubted if she could ever have courage to show her face. If only she could be sure that Mr. Wilburn was waiting for her! She would never forgive him for the way in which, like a callous swimming-master, he had pushed her into this deep water and left her to gasp and splutter by herself.

But she could not stay in the dressing-room all the evening; so, at last, pulling her courage together, she entered the hall. Wilburn, thank heaven, was there waiting for her, though, for the moment, she hardly recognized him, for she had not seen him in evening-dress before. His magnificence took her aback. Up to that time she had never realized what a handsome man he was. The tall starched collar, above his gleaming breast-plate of shirt-front, emphasized, by the contrast of their smoothness, the strength of his dark, powerful face: straight mouth, firm jaw, and steady, confident eyes. Before this she had always conceived him as a rugged, cumbrous figure, rustic, almost, in the sturdiness of his demeanour. He now appeared to her strong as ever, or even stronger, but with a strength of polished elegance, like that of a supple, shining steel. And as for middleage . . . What nonsense the man talked!

He gave her his arm, and they went forward together into the crowd that clustered round Lady Hingston at the foot of the stairs. In the company of such a cavalier Lady Hingston had no more terrors for her. Clare found her a neat, middle-aged woman, no taller than herself, with bright, bird-like eyes and a hooked nose that gave her a swift, falcon brilliance which, in youth, must have made her dark wildness enthralling. Even now her eyes flashed, and her speech came with the quick, keen accuracy of a swooping bird of prey that made Clare feel her own mind soft and fuddled.

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In Wilburn Lady Hingston found her match. It was evident that she recognized his quality for as she took his hand her eyes brightened and her swift wits acknowledged the challenge of his different strength in a wheeling display of virtuosity that left Clare abashed by the crudity of her own youth and inexperience. Then suddenly she came to earth and her eyes met Clare's with a naturalness that was as astonishing as her previous brilliance.

"So you're Clare Lydiatt," she saïd. "I know your grand-father well. There's nobody like him. I knew your mother too: I can see the likeness. Joe, do you remember Sylvia Weir? This is her daughter."

Clare found herself shaking the lifeless fingers of Sir Joseph Hingston. She knew him well by sight; but somehow the elegance of evening-dress, which had worked such a signal transformation in the case of Wilburn, had the effect of making the baronet less significant. He was a short, plump little man, with a solemn, cunning face, pale and pasty but for the bluish, semilunar pouches under his neutral eyes. The livery of English civilization had the effect of cheapening his whole appearance. His clothes, in spite of their admirable cut, made him look like a small, unprosperous shopkeeper, attired for a Masonic banquet. Even when he smiled and welcomed Clare, his eyes had the inward listless look of one whose mind was concentrated on other things: as indeed it was, for by this ceaseless brooding devotion he had made the fortunes of the great firm that bore his name. Beneath this mask of inertness it was evident that he, too, liked Wilburn and admired the achievements of his lady in a sphere wherein he had no desire to shine. Her brilliance and her social activities belonged to a department of the business that he was prepared and proud to finance without prejudice to his own, graver preoccupations. And as he held Clare's hand and smiled, his eyes had slowly turned to her escort.

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"Ah, Wilburn, I'm glad you've come. Furnival's here already. If you can spare a moment we might have a chat in the library."

He laid his hand dreamily on Wilburn's elbow and went on

speaking in an undertone as they drifted away.

"I know that Vivien is expecting you," said the clear, crisp voice of Lady Hingston, "though goodness knows where she's got to. There are lots of young people in the drawing-room. I expect she's there. Come along with me, Clare. Ah, here she is! I'll leave you in her hands. Vivien, darling, be sure that Clare has a good time. That's right, dearest. Ah, Mrs. Pomfret! How very delightful! Now don't tell me that you've left the Vicar behind!"

And there was Vivien with both her hands on Clare's shoulders: a dark, flashing vision of electric blue, a skimming kingfisher, for she, too, had her mother's bird-like swiftness, and in that brilliant flight Clare found herself whirled away. Vivien spoke excitedly as they went together.

"Oh, Clare, I'm so glad you've come! However did you get in without my seeing you? Such fun, and the music's ripping! You know Ralph told me that you'd come home. Months ago! My dear, I'm dreadfully ashamed of myself. But just at that time it was the end of the season. I was out four days a week. Father was simply splendid: he boxed our horses all over the place. And now it's nearly as bad; we've just got bicycles! You've no idea how exciting they are. You feel so helpless at first. Ridiculous, the way you want to run into everything! But it's all right here, you know. Only the bullocks on the drive. Ralph taught me. George and Eleanor are far too middle-aged and sober. You must get Ralph to teach you. He's splendid. Oh, dear, that's the Blue Danube, and I believe I've lost my programme. Well, that's their lookout, isn't it? Come along

quickly, and I'll introduce some nice men to you. Oh, Edward, is it really yours? I don't know my partners from Adam. I've lost my programme. I think I shall lose my head next. But do be a darling, Edward, and take Clare instead of me. Really and truly, I don't know where I am. You do know Edward Willis, don't you, Clare? That's splendid, splendid!"

And away she flashed, with her kindly, shining face, humming the tune of the Blue Danube as she went, leaving Clare in Edward Willis's awkward arms.

A queer, shy boy. He scarcely held her at all; he kept so far away from her that their gyrations lacked a fulcrum. She might just as well have been dancing with a dummy. And yet Clare knew that he was nice, that his timidity might, with equal justice, have been called delicacy; and though his dancing was ludicrous compared with that of the girls at St. Monica's, or, above all, that of the indefinitely receding Miss Boldmere, the music and the glassy floor of the Stourford drawing-room were inspiring beyond anything that Clare had ever known.

How could one dream of dancing to the music of a tinkling piano once having tasted the richness of these sensuous strings? She thought of the dingy class-room at Alvaston, the rough, chalked floor, the forms piled against ink-stained walls under the dirty gas-jets, and compared them with this brilliant chamber of cream and gold, the lucent floor of teak, the chandeliers of sparkling Venetian glass on whose facets the white light of Sir Toseph's electric bulbs played with the fire of diamonds.

And from St. Monica's her mind, or some sombre part of it that lay brooding beneath these rich perceptions of colour, scent and sound, traversed the dark lanes of hawthorn that lay between her and Pen House, where Thirza had put her grandfather to bed, and Aunt Cathie sat with eyes strained above her embroidery frame. Poor, dear, Aunt Cathie! And yet how sweet

she had been. How sweet, how thrilling, how wildly intoxicating, was all this brightly-coloured tissue of life! Her heart fluttered with the desire to live; the life in her was swift and greedy as a flame. Nothing must escape her!

Too swift . . . too swift! The music ceased. Together they passed over the slippery floor into the domed shadow of Sir Joseph's famous conservatory, into the cool smell of moss and dripping water and the faint, sickly perfume of gardenias. They sat down together. In the dusk she became aware of Edward Willis's earnest eyes, already pained with wrestling for some speech. It suddenly occurred to her that through all the transports of that waltz neither of them had spoken a word. Edward had been as dumb as Mr. Wilburn; and yet his silence neither troubled nor irritated her. She smiled at him and at herself. She felt it her duty to help him out; but by this time he had found speech and begun to talk about poetry. O'Shaughnessy: Music and Moonlight. She had never heard of either; but even as he began a stammered exposition, Vivien pounced on them in one of her rapid kingfisher flights, and snatched her away.

"Thank you so much, Edward dear," she said. "I've kept the second extra for you as a compensation. I'm sure Clare's frightfully interested in what you're telling her, but it's my mission in life to get her programme filled. Here it is. I'm sure you're anxious to dance with her again, so you'd better book one at once. She dances beautifully. I watched you. Far better than you do."

And when the dance was booked, away they went. Within two minutes Clare found herself bewildered with an excess of partners; half a dozen immaculate young men from North Bromwich, two of Ralph Hingston's Oxford friends, and a number of Vivien's own hunting-field acquaintances.

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"But where's that brother of mine?" she cried suddenly, when Clare's programme was nearly full. "He's spending the whole evening on the back stairs with Dorothy Powys. I shall have to look after both of them. He's no business to neglect his duty like this. Not duty, Clare dear," she added; "I don't mean that. I simply haven't time to choose my words. But I do so want you to have a good time. Ralph dances like an angel, and I know he's dying to dance with you. When he met you on Stourton station the other day . . . No, I won't tell you what he said. What lovely lace! It makes all our new frocks look positively common. Honiton, too. That's what the Queen wears. This must be number five. Clare, I must fly!"

So Clare's evening passed in a whirl of light and music. Her partners seemed, all of them, pleasant, clean young men of the type that might well be attracted by Vivien's own bright frankness. They all danced well, far better than Edward Willis, and by the middle of the evening she had become so accustomed to the variations of masculine steps that her mind was no longer concentrated on her feet, so that she had time to consider what her partners were really like through a series of waltzes, quadrilles and lancers.

In the last of these, a set complicated by the waywardness of Edward Willis, who could not keep the figures in his head, she suddenly found herself curtseying to corners with Ralph Hingston. Though she had often seen him dancing in the distance, this was the first time that they had been brought face to face, and the moment was awkward, for she couldn't help feeling that he had purposely avoided her. When the music struck up he bowed to her curtsey with a kind of mocking gravity that disturbed her. She was rather frightened of him, far more frightened that she had been on Stourton station. In his blue eyes there was a lurking wickedness that reminded her

of Vivien's story of Dorothy Powys and the back stairs and compelled her to blush.

And yet, a moment later, when she had set to him and found herself whirling round with his arm about her waist, her shyness disappeared, and she felt that she had been dancing with him all her life; as if he, with his honest eyes and smooth, fair face, were more powerful, more significant, more intimate, than any of the men with whom she had danced that evening. And as they met and parted throughout the changing figures of the dance, this intimacy was sealed by a series of quick whispers to which she found herself answering with an ease and a coldness that astonished her.

"Clare, I've been wanting to dance with you all night."

"You never asked me."

"That's Wilburn's fault. You came so late. When I saw you'd come, I felt quite mad about it."

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself, anyway."

"Don't talk rubbish. I've had a beastly time. I've been doing duty dances with the most awful old frumps."

"What about Miss Powys?"

"Dorothy Powys? Lord Arthur's one of our directors. I've got to take her in to supper. Can't get out of it."

"Oh, do be quiet! She'll hear you."

"I don't mind if she does. Dorothy Powys is a sportsman. She'll understand. I say, Clare . . ."

"Do look! We're holding up the set."

"Oh, damn the set!"

And he was swept away from her on the vigorous tide of the "Geisha" music.

But as they linked hands again and again in the weaving of the Grand Chain, he caught her and contrived to finish the sentence that the music had broken.

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"After supper," he said. "I shall look for you then. On the steps."

"What about your duties?" she whispered.

"Duties? I say . . . that's a promise?"

Chon-kina, chon-kina, chon, chon, kina-kina, Nagasaki Yokohama Hakodate Hoy!

The promise was never given. At that moment, obeying some strange communal instinct, all the dancers burst out singing the nonsensical words of Sidney Jones's tune. The set ended in a fury of hand-clapping. Clare found herself breathless on Edward Willis's arm; Ralph was standing with Dorothy Powys on his; but as the laughing dancers streamed between them, he seemed to forget his partner. His lips framed the word "promise" again, and Clare, hardly knowing what she did, nodded and answered him with her eyes.

10

THE BEACON

THEY ate their supper amid the ponderous oak of Sir Joseph's dining-room, and as Clare sipped her borage-scented claret cup, Edward Willis resumed the theme which Vivien had broken in the conservatory.

"He was an ichthyologist, you know. . . ."

Clare stared at him blankly. In the interval O'Shaughnessy and his works had been forgotten. She did not even know what an ichthyologist was.

"An ichthyologist. He spent all his life in the British Museum. Stuffed fishes, I suppose. Then he wrote Music and

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Moonlight, about thirteen years ago. Astonishingly good. There's one stanza. It's like nothing else."

He bent close above her, so that she might hear him among the clatter of plates and voices:

I think the sun's kiss will scarce fall
Into one flower's cup:
I think the bird will miss me,
And give the summer up:
O sweet place, desolate in tall
Wild grass, have you forgot
How her lips loved to kiss me,
Now that they kiss me not?

She had begun to listen, smiling; but as he recited, in his low, shy voice, the sensual loveliness of the words swept her mind away from her body's surroundings into that sweet place, desolate in tall wild grass, of which he spoke. Yes, it was beautiful. Strange, too, that on an evening dedicated to emotions so different from this, she should be able to respond to the appeal of such crepuscular words.

"Jolly, isn't it?" said Edward Willis, apologetically, and brought her back to herself. Almost to herself; for still there was a difference. Her heart warmed to this austere, shy young man who could achieve poetry in the Stourford dining-room and stir the secret deeps beneath that frothy surface. She looked at him again, with more respect than amusement; and, in that moment, her mind made a swift comparison between him and Dudley Wilburn, standing solitary, erect and steady as a rock against the Corinthian pillars of the library door; between him and Ralph Hingston, whose eyes caught hers with a smile above a lifted glass of champagne. It troubled her to realize the extraordinary variety of mankind; she was astonished to confess that while Edward's whispered poetry had transported her mo-

mentarily to a sphere of experience whose very existence she had forgotten, and while Wilburn's presence inspired her, as usual, with respect for his power and stability, it was only Ralph Hingston's smile that brought a blush to her cheeks.

"He died in the same year as George Eliot," Edward was saying.

The words reached her like an echo, long after he had spoken; and though she quickly apologized, and asked him to repeat them, a sudden access of shyness made him leave the subject in mid-air.

"I think they're going up the hill," he said. "Hadn't you better go into the dressing-room and get your wraps? It may be cold."

She clutched eagerly at this opportunity to hide her confusion; it even seemed to her that Edward Willis was relieved to lose her. When she emerged from the dressing-room, five minutes later, Ralph Hingston was standing outside. There, too, stood Wilburn with his hat in his hand. A panic seized her. The glance with which Wilburn greeted her was assuredly possessive, and, after all, Aunt Cathie had committed her to his charge. But she had given Ralph Hingston her promise; and evidently he took its fulfilment for granted.

"Ready?" he said, and as she smiled with embarrassment, he moved backward to let her pass, deliberately separating her from Wilburn. She hurried down the steps. In a moment he was at her side. "I think Mr. Wilburn was waiting for me," she whispered.

Ralph l'aughed. "Let him wait!" he said.

They crossed the drive and entered a grass alley within tall black hedges. The harsh odour of yews dropped, like a curtain, between them and the rose-gardens on either side. Sometimes it seemed as if the curtains swayed and a ravishing gust blew through, so that Clare was conscious, without seeing, of masses of June roses breathing out sweetness under the heavy night. They passed quickly down the dark alley, Ralph with his long, free strides, Clare fluttering silently at his side. Where the yews ended stood a fountain of grey stone and a circular Palladian belvedere. The spray of the fountain rose in a starlit mist; its watery jets cracked in the air like whips; and when they reached it, everyone, of a common impulse, paused for a moment and turned to look backward down the long yew vista to the fantastic bulk and blazing windows of the castle. In darkness, and at such a distance, the gatehouse tower and stucco battlements of Stourford lost their spurious air. On Clare, at least, they imposed an illusion of romance that recalled enchanted castles of the Morte d'Arthur and shed a knightly glamour on her companion.

In that stone circle, haunted by the fountain's sound, the stream of guests hung for a moment as in an eddy, then spilled and scattered beyond into the darkness of a broad, somnolent beechwood, its floor muffled with mast and roofed by motionless horizontal tapestries of leaf. All through that warm green crypt the path climbed continually; and when they emerged from its shadows into an air that seemed, by contrast, cool and rarefied, they saw the hill's smooth shoulder rising close above them like a strung bow, blue-black against a tawny arc of sky that flared and paled with the leaping and subsidence of the hidden beacon's flame.

"Bad luck!" Ralph cried. "I knew we should be late. They've lighted it already. The wood's so dry it'll burn away in no time. Can you put on a sprint?"

He grasped her arm; together they strained panting up the hill's last and steepest contour by a path that twisted through vigorous bracken, until, on the plateau beside the standing stones,

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they saw the pyramidal beacon flaring in the midst of a huge, empty circle round whose circumference, like masses of curious insects, clustered the whole population of Stourford, fireworshippers, rapt by the furious beauty of flame. And Clare, too, stood entranced, thrillingly conscious of the arm that he had now slipped about her, while the fire roared and crackled, drawing the breath out of her body with its draught, carrying her spirit upward, upward on its flying sheets of flame; until, suddenly, Ralph's arm tightened and checked her!

"Look . . . look!" he said. They turned together, and saw, beneath them, dragging over the furzy hillside, the straggling remnants of the Stourford party, their faces upturned and lit by the fiery reflex of the sky; beyond these the void darkness of the Severn basin, and, further still, like the fires of slowly setting planets, the trail of beacons that ringed the March of Wales. From north to south they hung in a sinister crescent. Wrekin, Caer Caradoc, Radnor Forest, Brown Clee and Titterstone, Abberley, Malvern, with May Hill, a spent spark sinking into the Forest of Dean.

Clare caught her breath. The vision of this vast expanse of earth made manifest by the beacons' definition impressed her, but even more than its magnificence she felt the strangeness of her own position. She was no longer sure of herself. What power had whirled her out of the lights of Stourford on to this uplifted hillside? Who was this stranger whose arm encircled and possessed her? What madness in herself allowed him to hold her like that? The van of the Stourford party crawled upward and toward them. Half shy, half thrilled, she strained away from him; but he had no intention of letting her escape.

"Come along," he said quickly, "let's get away from all this mob. We'll try the other side of the hill where it's quiet."

Indeed the whole hillside was scattered with pale summer

frocks, flitting up, mothwise, from the villages of the plain. Amid the cries and laughter of this drifting flight, Ralph took Clare's arm and hurried her, through ankle-pricking acres of gorse, round the shoulder of the hill, where the crowd's tumult and the crackling of the fire were lost and only a gigantic reflex reddened the sky.

There, like a careless scarf, a fleece of firs trailed downward through the darkness of Uffdown Wood into the scorched basin of the Black Country, whose damped fires burned so low on that night of holiday that it might almost have reverted to its primal and pastoral greenness. On all that northern slope there was no sound but that of black pine-needles shuddering in uneasiness at the proximity of the fire, and, down in the June meadows, four hundred feet beneath them, the rasping of a single melancholy corn-crake. They sat down together on a tufted hedge-bank at the edge of the plantation where all the secrecy of night seemed to have been distilled into the mild and resinous air that enveloped them; and Clare, with the excitement of the evening still throbbing in her brain, found that silence so sweet and reassuring that when he spoke she was filled with vague terror.

"Clare," he was saying, "Clare, I adore you. . . . You're far more lovely and wonderful than I ever imagined. I can't believe it's really you. You're so quiet, so cool. You're like a little ghost. For heaven's sake say something . . . anything

. . . just to let me know that you're real!"

He took her wrists in both his hands. His palms were hot on her cool skin. He held her so fast that she knew that he must feel the flutter of her pulses. She began to fear the pressure of his hands; their strength was a symbol of something threatening; they were closing not on her wrists but on her life; an overpowering instinct of self-preservation called on her to escape them. It was too soon, too soon. She had been given no time to gather strength to meet him. Nothing but fight could save her from defeat, absorption, the annihilation of what she imagined to be herself. But though she strained away from him he would not let her go.

"Why don't you speak?" he said. "You're not offended? You're not frightened of me?"

She was too frightened to speak. Not frightened, exactly, but unable to think; for all the time, her brain was suffused with flushes and wanings of fire like the sheet of sky above the fringe of fir-tops.

Her silence troubled him. He was determined to break it. He drew her toward him by the wrists. She could feel the warmth of his breath as he whispered close to her face:

"Clare, Clare—I want to go on saying your name, over and over again. Clare, my sweet one, I love you. Why won't you look at me?"

She dared not raise her eyes, for she knew that they were full of tears. The red light in her brain went on flushing and waning until, quite suddenly, there came a moment of suspension and quietude in which it seemed that she had found herself; not the old self that she knew, for that could never be the same, but another: a hushed, calm consciousness, full of minute, delicious tremors like a countryside that shudders and holds breath in the night after a violence of summer rain.

In this new state she became aware once more of her surroundings. For a long while she had been lost in the palpitations of an emotion which was like light rather than thought; but now she felt and saw the tufted hedgebank on which she was sitting, with Ralph so strangely kneeling at her feet; she saw the velvety contours of tree-tops in Uffdown Wood, the vague vastness of the basin beyond. She smelt the dropping odour of

pines and the thymy fragrance of turf. And, as her senses, one by one, awakened to a still poignancy of perception, her eyes rested with a curious, possessive boldness on Ralph's upturned face. Slowly, dreamily, uncontrolled, or, at most, controlled by some new spirit within her, they perused the features of this stranger and wondered at their strangeness; the smooth, wide brow, the straight nose, the parted, eager lips, the blue eyes, black in darkness, whose burning eagerness she hadn't dared to face.

She wondered if it were possible that this was the boy with whom she had laughed and whispered under the sparkling chandeliers at Stourford an hour before, the creature whom she had accepted under the name of Ralph Hingston. No . . . he was different. It seemed that he, too, had changed as completely as herself. That Ralph had been a stranger; but this new being, though far more strange, seemed as familiar as if she had created him out of her own dreams and desires. In this creation all past memory had been whirled backward into limbo. In this new birth they faced each other, coeval and coequal, transported and unashamed.

For a moment they gazed at each other in the revealing darkness without a word. Then, slowly, his hot fingers released her wrists; his arms were folded round her, his lips burned against the coldness of her cheek. And gradually it seemed to her that the strength with which his arms held her to him was not the violent and terrifying power which she had first imagined, that he was really no stronger than herself, perhaps, even, weaker; so that her own arms, strangely potent and daring, embraced his body and held it, protectively, as though he were a child, in a grave, wise possession that she was eager to give and happy in giving.

Once more the visible, sensible world was lost. Only, above

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its sea-deep sounds and sights and odours, her brain was aware, as in sleep, of the corn-crake's monotonous sawing in the sunken meadows:

O sweet place, desolate in tall
Wild grass, have you forgot
How his lips loved to kiss me . . . ?

The flare of the beacon faded from the sky beyond the wood; the starry frame of Pegasus gaped above them, stealing slowly westward, marking the drift of moments that for them had no reality. Suddenly, without reasoning, the sense of time returned. Clare's fingers tightened. Her lips brushed his cheek. Then, with mysterious accord, they loosened their embrace. They rose to their feet and stood silently smiling at each other in the darkness that their eyes had learned to penetrate. Solemnly, lingeringly, they kissed again. Ralph took her without a word, and slowly, with his arm still about her, they passed along the dim edge of the pinewood and out on to the hilltop again.

By this time, as the sky warned them, the bonfire had flared itself away. Nothing now remained of it but a circle of lurid embers round whose circumference, like crippled, wing-singed insects, a few stragglers of the multitude that had fluttered up so gaily stood blinking at the ashes as though they were still too fascinated to move. For a little while they searched in vain for any remnants of the Stourford party. It seemed that they had been left behind, and so conspicuously that Clare began to feel an embarrassment that extinguished the last flickers of their secret fire.

"But they've all gone," she cried. "It will look too awful for us to come slinking in together. What will they say?"

He laughed. He shouldn't have laughed. "They'll have to say it sooner or later. The sooner the better," he told her.

"But don't you see," she said, "how horrid it is for me? I don't even know what the time is."

"Neither do I," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea. That's part of the fun of it."

"Fun! Mr. Wilburn will be waiting for me."

"A little waiting won't hurt him. I'm not going to consider Dudley Wilburn's feelings . . . if he's got any."

"Oh, Ralph, can't you understand? Everybody's bound to say . . . they can't help saying . . ."

"That I love you?" He laughed again. "Well, so I do. I want to go on saying it so that you can hear: I love you, Clare, I love you, I love you. . . ."

However she protested, he would only tell her that he loved her; and as they scrambled down the moonlit hillside together, hand in hand, like two excited children, the intoxication of swift, hazardous movement and of his words of adoration left her so dazed and breathless that she could protest no more. Among the pillars of the beechwood they went as silently as the brown owls that hunted in its shadow, recapturing, in another silent embrace, the ecstasy which she seemed to have lost.

"My darling, when am I going to see you again?" he said. "To-morrow . . . somehow, somewhere? We've only two or three minutes more, so we'd better settle that at once."

The question alarmed her. She had not even given a thought to their next meeting; the moment of her unspoken avowal had been self-sufficient, unrelated to space or time. She had a feeling that love such as this should continue, as it had begun, in miraculous independence of thought or provision.

"I can't live without seeing you," he said. "I suppose I must talk to your grandfather about it. Why shouldn't I ride over to Wychbury to-morrow?"

At the awful definiteness of this proposal her alarm increased. The vision of a formal visit: her grandfather glaring in his armchair, Aunt Cathie, grim and judicial, at his elbow, filled her with terror. At that moment her mind was so numbed and distracted that she couldn't even think of it. She could do nothing but throw herself on his mercy.

"Oh, please, please, don't think of anything like that," she said. "I couldn't bear it. You go so fast: I can't keep pace with vou."

"Sooner or later . . ." he reminded her.

She shook her head. "No, no, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't."

"But it's so simple, Clare. I love you. You know that I love you. And you love me."

"Oh, Ralph, Ralph . . ."

"I shall speak to the guv'nor this evening . . . to-morrow morning . . . the first moment I can get him alone."

"No, no, you can't, you mustn't. If you go on like this I shall hate it. I don't want anyone to know, not even Vivien. Can't you see that if anyone knows but us two it'll all be spoilt?"

He couldn't; but though he would not admit her arguments, he allowed her to persuade him. These mysterious, incalculable reservations inflamed him the more by adding to the difficulties of his conquest.

"At any rate, there must be somewhere where we can meet," he said. "You can't tell me that you're shut up in a nunnery. Isn't there any other place where you can be found?"

He was so insistent that, in the end, she told him of her early morning visits to St. Chad's.

"What on earth do you go there for?" he asked her.

"I go to hear Mass." The word rang through her mind like the tolling of a bell.

"To hear Mass?" he laughed uneasily. "What does that mean? You're not a Catholic?"

"Not a Roman Catholic," she told him. "Mr. Darnay says Mass there every morning."

"Good lord!" he said; and the tone of his voice was so awed and bewildered that a new sense of his strangeness and her own insecurity began to trouble her. Not that she loved him less. She still believed utterly, passionately, that she could love no other; but beyond the blinding flame of this love she divined in him the existence of other mysterious qualities, virtues or deficiencies, integral parts of this overwhelming stranger which might be at variance with herself. She realized that she knew nothing about him: nothing at all except that she loved him. Was love enough? For this enraptured instant, yes, and yes a thousand times. Yet, as they clung together in the darkness of of the vew-shadowed fountain, with Stourford blazing like a great lantern at the end of the alley, her mind was clouded by an uneasiness which arose not only from the echoes of his perplexity, but from her consciousness of the matter that had perplexed him, the religion which, latterly, had dominated her life, and now, at the first breath of human passion, had faded from her mind. She knew this weakness, this betraval, as a sin that could only be expiated by some signal penance; the austere figure of Mr. Darnay loomed so pitilessly in her mind that she compelled herself to forget his spiritual imminence in the warm, consoling presence of the man she loved. "For God is Love," she told herself. "We know that God is Love . . ."

That night she and Ralph spoke no more together. Unnoticed they mingled with the crowd that hung about the steps of the moonlit gateway waiting for their carriages, and once more an instinct of self-protection took her to Vivien's side. There, too, a few moments later, Dudley Wilburn found her.

In her eyes—perhaps it was fancy—he seemed more staid and self-contained than ever.

"So here you are, Clare," he said, smiling with compressed lips. "I think, for poor Jabez's sake, we'd better say good-bye. Are you ready? Very well, then, I'll wait here for you. Don't be too long."

Five minutes later they were ready to go. Almost to her relief Ralph had disappeared. But Lady Hingston, whom she now regarded in a new and interested light, swooped on her with a swift and brilliant gesture of farewell.

"Now that you've broken the ice," she said, "we shall expect to see more of you. You do play tennis, don't you? Vivien will love to have you. There seems to be so few young people about in these days. Ah, Mr. Wilburn! Good-bye, good-bye! It was so sweet of you to come. Vivien, I know you want to speak to Clare before she goes."

Then Vivien took her hand with an enigmatic smile.

"Well, Clare?" she said.

"Oh, Vivien, don't . . ."

Suddenly, with a quick, warm impulse, Vivien kissed her; and Clare, hotly blushing, returned her kiss. Vivien was wonderful. She had never known a girl so bright and generous. Wilburn's hand was on her arm; he drew her gently, firmly away.

And so, once more, they drove into the still, scented lanes. They had driven a long way before Wilburn spoke. In a hard, heavy voice, which seemed to emphasize his remoteness, she heard him asking if she had enjoyed herself. Softly she answered, "Yes." She could not trust herself to say more. But as she sat there beside him, so near and yet so distant, she was thankful for the shadows that hid her face from the waning moon's betrayal.



BOOK TWO

THE TIME OF ROSES



I

MIDSUMMER DAYS

EVERY morning Clare took her way over the fields to the Saxon chapel, and there, on the edge of the coppice, where his horse stood patiently, tied to the rusty hazels, Ralph would be waiting for her when Mass was over.

At first these morning devotions made him faintly jealous; they represented a part of her life that he could neither possess nor understand; for all that he knew of religion had come to him by way of routine in the chapel at Eton, and there was no shred of mysticism in all his mind. With the directness that was part of his principal appeal to her he dared to express a little of this jealousy. She received it gravely; but he saw that she was pained by the mockery that had crept into his voice, and since nothing in the world could have distressed him more than to have pained her, he soon abandoned his enquiries and accepted her religion as something subtly feminine beyond his comprehension.

It was fortunate that Mr. Darnay's instruction had taught her to regard faith as a matter of Divine Revelation; for if she had felt it her duty to proselytize she might have found Ralph a difficult subject. As it was, she appreciated the delicacy of his forbearance, and he, when once he realized how integral a part of her life these devotions were, was thankful, at least, that their regular observance brought her to his arms.

And indeed, if he had known it, they even made her more beautiful. She came to him, on those mornings, with eyes full of a shining quietness, with the bloom and hue of a flower whose petals have opened secretly in the night, with an air so sweet and virginal that he almost feared to touch her.

Behind the hazel hedge rose a plantation of thinned larches, and down its alleys of rabbit-cropped turf they would walk together or stand lost in long embraces. The white sky hung low above them; no birds sang; the trees held breath. The place was so sequestered, so holy in its quietude that even the tumultuous beating of their hearts seemed impious. In such enraptured moments time passed with incredible speed. No sooner had they met than it was time for Ralph to hurry back to Stourford and join his father on their journey to the works at Wolverbury. Clare, in her sweet reluctance, stood by him while he untied his reins from the hazel boughs and fondled the velvet muzzle of Starlight, his big bay hunter. When he had mounted, Ralph would lean from the saddle and kiss her, while Starlight tossed his head with impatience; and all these kisses were flavoured with the harsh, pleasant odour of the horse's withers. Then he would ride away down the long slope and under the edge of the woods, till she saw nothing but his head rising and falling as he crossed the shoulder of Pen Beacon and dropped into the green cup where the Stourford chimneysmoke rose straight into the air.

Long after she had lost him Clare would stand there without moving. The world, for her, lay under an enchantment stiller and more intense than that of morning. She dreamed, and yet she was awake; so wide awake, indeed, that all her senses were strained to an unusual acuteness. The hot scent of sweetbriar or trailing honeysuckle pierced her with a joy that she could scracely bear; for her heart was still full of her lover's image, his strength, his cleanliness, and the gentleness of his frank eyes.

June passed, and with it summer sank into the languors of July: a season of thunderous skies, beneath whose pressure and the burden of their own leaves the woods were bowed; a season of drifting scents; for now the meadows along the base of the hills were being mowed; the tall wild grass lay prostrate in swathes, and the crake of the landrails had given place to that of distant mowing-machines which stubbornly, pitilessly devoured their ripening covers. These sounds alone disturbed the silence of daytime. It was as if all the birds had fallen asleep. Sometimes the note of a cuckoo, languid and flattened, floated with bell-like melancholy out of the sky. Only at sunset, when the white dome deepened to a dim luminosity, did the thrushes in the garden at Pen House take heart to sing. But they sang out of thankfulness rather than joy, and soon, as though awed by the universal silence, faltered and were still. Evening fell, and in the hillside copses beyond the mill-pool, its one voice, a lonely night-churn, began his soft, intermittent reeling, spinning the threads of enchantment in which the new lovers were bound.

Already a month had passed; and yet he could never be sure of her. Again and again he had begged her to let him visit Pen House and interview her grandfather; she was as obstinate and perverse as she was lovely; and so light-winged that when he thought he held her, she escaped his clumsy fingers like a butterfly and left him gaping. It was Clare herself who frustrated his well-laid plans; she wouldn't even accept the invitations to tennis-parties at Stourford which Vivien sent her.

"I suppose you realize that you're making a fool of me," he

complained. "One day you do that, and the next you pretend that you love me."

"If I didn't love you," she said, "I should want to go. It's the fact that I love you which makes me so awfully shy. Not shy, exactly. I can't explain it. Oh, Ralph, I wish you could understand!"

"I can't," he told her flatly. "I'm sick to death of all this secrecy. You're not ashamed of me? Then, why in God's name can't you be consistent and come to Stourford, where we can be together all the afternoon instead of meeting for a miserable half-hour?"

"But don't you see," she said, "that's exactly my point? We shouldn't be together. We shouldn't have a single moment without people staring at us. A lot of strange people that I've never seen in my life before. Your mother, too . . . and Vivien."

"You needn't bother your head about mother. And Vivien's a ripper. I've always wanted you two to chum up."

"I know," she confessed, "and I like Vivien awfully. She was perfectly sweet to me that night. But that doesn't make any difference."

"You make me simply mad," he told her. "Do you really mean to say that you'll refuse again?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry! I don't believe you're sorry in the least. If you refuse to come to Stourford I'm hanged if I'll come to St. Chad's."

She smiled. For though he rode off black with disappointment she knew that, next morning, he would return. She knew that their next meeting would be more ecstatic for the difference between them.

At first she could not accept these ecstasies without a sense of guilt. In former days, when Mass was over, she had some-

times waited in the disused graveyard of St. Chad's; for the first part of her way homeward lay in the same direction as Mr. Darnay's, and more than once they had walked down the hillside together. But now, as soon as the last words of the office were spoken, she left the church at once, and hurried to their meeting-place with a heart that beat with more than religious emotion. She asked herself how much of the eagerness with which she set out every morning to St. Chad's was inspired by the Holy Sacrament and how much by her desire to meet her lover. It was a question that she dared not answer; one that could only be solved by Mr. Darnay's direction at the confessional.

And yet she could not bring herself to embody in it her confessions. The rarest beauty of their love, she told herself, had always consisted in its secrecy from all human knowledge; and even though she might think of Mr. Darnay as priest rather than as man, her acute, instinctive shyness told her that, if once he knew, something must be irrevocably lost. This was the one part of her life that she could not surrender to his guidance. It was a secret between God and herself, too fragile to bear the weight of human intervention. To Him in prayer, she confessed the doubts that troubled her, trying to believe that she had made atonement for a dubious sin, convincing herself, at last, that this confession was enough.

Ralph's passion seemed to gather strength from her frustrations; now he was no longer content with seeing her once a day. Every evening, when Ellen had removed the cloth from the dining-room table, when the doctor nodded or snored in his chair, and Aunt Cathie brooded over her embroidery frame, Clare would steal away into the still, luminous night, and pass down the drive to the place of their appointment. Usually, because of the enchantment of that quiet water, and because it had been the scene of the first of these nocturnal meetings, she went towards the mill-pond. She reached it through a breath of meadow sweet, through fields where the ghost-swifts danced like mayflies over the silvery swathes; and Clare in her white muslins, was like a ghost-moth herself, flitting among the black alders whose twisted roots ran deep into holes where chub were lying. At this hour the whole world was full of white, phantasmal presences. The hedges were piled with moony elderflowers, pale campion, plumed cow-parsnip, whose blooms shone as with a phosphorescence fallen from the hot sky, where banks of floating cumulus carried the moonlight hidden in their convolutions.

At night a milky mist rose from the pool's surface. Clare and her lover would stand knee-deep in it, detached from earth, as though they were floating in a cloud. There they would cling together in long silences. It moved her to think that Ralph, a creature whom she judged so infinitely more material than herself, was contented with this silence, and realized, as she did, the impiety of words.

In that diffused moonlight she could better trust herself to meet his eyes, to allow her own to dwell on the modelling of his features. It was thus that she loved to think of them when he was away. And as they stood, she would wonder at her possession, while, through her mind, on another and distant plane of thought, the melody of Schumann's *Mondnacht* floated downward like starlight, filling her eyes with tears and her heart with an emotion that made her feel as if it surely must break.

Sometimes, on starry nights, they would leave the valley and climb high upon the lonely flank of Uffdown, where all the plain lay hidden in mist below them, and they lifted far above it into a sky of tremulous clarity. Sometimes she walked homeward with him through the lanes; and when they had kissed

good-bye, he could not leave her but must turn backward to the very drive-gate of Pen House. Then she would hurry upstairs with lips still tingling from his kisses, and she would undress in the dark, with closed eyes, trying to carry the memory of them with her over the bounds of sleep.

So summer fell away into autumn. And now their meetings were wrapped in an odour of dead leaves, their hot cheeks spattered with rain and swept by winds. In a little while they would no longer be able to see each other in the copse beside St. Chad's, nor could Clare find excuses for leaving Pen House at night. Beneath the pressure of these restrictions Ralph was growing restless; and Clare began to see for herself that their secrecy could not be maintained much longer. He pressed her, and she refused him so often that, in the end, it seemed as if they must quarrel again.

"I'm not going to put up with this much longer, Clare," he said. "You know jolly well that you're the only thing that matters to me. It isn't as if we didn't know our own minds, either. That's what makes it ridiculous. I'm quite ready to admit that I should be a nuisance at Pen House. With the doctor ill and all that I realize that they shouldn't be bothered with a pair of lunatics like us. But Stourford's different. I've told you, it's just like a big hotel. We all go our own ways, and nobody takes the least notice of anyone else. Even if any of them were critical, which they won't be, it needn't make any difference to us. I'm not a kid, Clare, though you treat me like one. I'm my own master. I've capital and income of my own—Aunt Gillian's money—and I've no need to be beholden to the guv'nor or anyone else. There's no reason on earth why we shouldn't be married to-morrow if we wished to."

"Oh, Ralph," she said, "but there is; there are a hundred reasons. I believe I know your mother better than you do."

"For heaven's sake, leave mother out of it."

"You can't leave your mother out of it, Ralph; you know you can't."

"Then, don't, my dear child, don't! That's what I've told you from the first. The sooner she's let into it the better."

"I wish you'd try to see what I mean," she said. "The whole point is that I'm just nobody."

"You're nothing of the sort. I love you, and I'm going to marry you. Isn't that enough?"

"And you're somebody," she persisted. "Your father's an important man; he's a baronet."

"Baronet be hanged! He gave thirty thousand to the Wolverbury hospital; that's all that means."

"But he is. Your mother knows it, if you don't. She'll expect you to marry somebody like Dorothy Powys . . ."

"Dorothy Powys! I'd see her damned first. My dear child, what rot you talk!"

"It isn't rot. If George died . . ."

"But George won't die, my dear. And if he did, it wouldn't make any difference. George and Eleanor have two twins already. If you go on like this they'll have a dozen by the time we're married."

She shook her head: "That makes no difference to the fact that none of them will think I'm good enough for you."

"Perverse little devil!"

He was really angry, and yet, in her company, he could not keep his anger for long. He saw that it was no good arguing with her; she was illogical; as soon as he had cornered her by some reasonable argument she flew off at a tangent or hurriedly completed the circle, arriving at the precise point from which they had begun. Sooner or later he knew that he would have to force her hand.

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THE BELFRY

DURING the last days of September, for the first time since Clare's return, the health of Dr. Weir had been failing steadily. A bad patch, he called it, dismissing Aunt Cathie's apprehensions with his usual brusqueness; but, even so, he had consented, almost willingly, to another consultation. "It costs nothing, anyway," he had said, as though that were the most important aspect of the business.

Next day Lloyd Moore came out again to Wychbury. "There's nothing fresh to report," he told Aunt Cathie. "Of course he's weaker than when I saw him two years ago; but then, he's two years older. A wonderful man, Miss Weir, a wonderful man."

Aunt Cathie shook her head. She did not believe him. Experience had given her an insight, transcending science in all the minutest mechanisms of the old man's life. Watching him, she knew that he was changing under her eyes. Now, for hours at a time, he would sit without movement or volition. Not even the commercial pages of the North Bromwich Courier could hold his attention for long. The paper would slip from his hands on to the floor, and when she picked it up and gave it to him, he would not remember what he had been reading. Time after time, when she heard his bell's imperious jangle, she would hurry to the bedroom, expecting disaster, and he would only stare at her crossly, as if she were intruding, or had awakened him. And then, as likely as not, he'd grumble: "Well, Catherine since you're here you may as well fetch me the black dispatch-

box." The black dispatch-box contained his will. All afternoon he would lie there, fingering the stiff legal paper, as though it made him feel that the money to which it related was actually in his hands.

The sum of these disquieting symptoms cumulated in a burden which Aunt Cathie could no longer share with Thirza Rudge alone. One evening she took Clare into her confidence. Her red eyelids, her compressed mouth, the disjointed, awkward words in which she disclosed her fears betrayed a degree of suffering which Clare was helpless to assuage. Aunt Cathie made that quite clear. "Of course you can't do anything," she said; "but I thought I'd better tell you, so that you should be prepared . . . supposing anything happens. Of course you won't mention a word of this to Ellen," she added, "there's no reason why the village people should be given something to talk about."

All through the next day Clare was troubled by a recurrent vision of Aunt Cathie's anguished face and echoes of her voice. They invaded her brain as she knelt in the dank and stony air of St. Chad's, pleading for intercession; they shadowed the moments of her morning meeting with Ralph, obstinately challenging her right to careless happiness amid such suffering; so that when he told her that evening that he had arranged to take a week's holiday from Wolverbury, Ralph found her unresponsive and could not understand.

"You sound as if you didn't care," he told her. "For God's sake, tell me what I've done now!"

She smiled. It was so like him to imagine that the fault was his. She fondled his fair head as she began to tell him what had happened; and then, before she was half way through with her story, she found that she was crying in his arms; not because she loved her grandfather and feared to lose him, nor yet entirely

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out of sympathy for Aunt Cathie, but rather because, poised between active poles of joy and dread, of intense happiness and imminent sorrow, of love and death, her mind became a field fit for fulmination, and discharged its emotional content like an empty tropical sky where nightlong lightning flickers. At last she was so shaken by sobs that she was forced to abandon the story altogether. She huddled close to Ralph's breast, allowing her weakness to be lost in the comfort of his strength, which, of itself, persuaded her to abandon the control for which she had been fighting.

Ralph had never seen her cry before; the steady impact of her sobs filled him with unusual tenderness. They revealed Clare, whose mettlesome spirit had already tantalized him, as a creature capable of equally adorable weakness. This revelation flattered his own strength; she was so little, so pitiful; it was his pride and privilege to protect her. The physical surrender of her grief filled him with an exquisite, intolerable mixture of emotions, with pain and triumph, with gentleness and fierce desire.

"It's only," she said at last, "that I feel I can't leave Aunt Cathie to face it all alone. Even if she doesn't want me. You see, I'm so helpless. It was silly of me to cry like that. I'm quite ashamed of myself."

"It was lovely of you," he declared. "Thank goodness you didn't have to cry alone. That's what I'm for."

She gazed into his dim eyes. His gentleness and generosity had touched her. She felt that she had been cruel to damp his enthusiasms with those weak tears.

"If everything's all right," she whispered, "I'll meet you at the Sling Mill, immediately after lunch to-morrow. But, darling, if you don't mind, I'd rather you didn't come to St. Chad's in the morning."

And when the morrow came she was there before him, in a muslin frock, with flounced skirt, puffed shoulders, lace bertha, and a small sailor hat perched upon the top of her high coiffure. The Sling Mill had been abandoned many years before; its windows were broken, the yard overgrown with grass and weeds that had sprung between abandoned mill-stones which lay there half embedded like broken monuments of some prehistoric tribe. Against this background of age and desolation Clare's vivid youth shone like a flower. But still her eyes were serious.

"I think he's better," she told him. "But Aunt Cathie's curious. She won't say another word, or tell me how I can help her. It's almost as if she were jealous, though, of course, it can't be that."

"But now you'll forget all about it," he said. "Clare, do you realize that this is the first time we've ever been properly alone? You make me want to run away with you and hide you somewhere. Now that I've got you I shan't let you go in a hurry. Nobody but you and me, for six whole hours. And what a day for us!"

It was an afternoon of blue and flying white, too clear, too brilliant to last. In the pit of the Sling Valley the air had been motionless; but as they climbed the slope to eastward, a resinous wind came singing through the firs. Already the fronds of bracken were turning brittle, the foxglove spires were set with bulging seed-vessels; only, on the tufted bank at the edge of the wood, hare-bells and sheep's-bit scabious danced in the bright air. Behind them they saw the dome of Uffdown ablaze with gorse, and Clare, to prove the proverb, must stop to take his breathless kisses.

On the top of Bromsley, by a broken gate, they halted for breath, and the west wind, blowing through Clare's muslin

THE TIME OF ROSES

sleeves and tossing her dark hair, filled her whole body with a draught of life; so clean it was, so cool, so swift, so stimulant, that it washed out of her mind all consciousness of her old narrow world. Around them, in every direction save where the shoulder of Uffdown crossed the sky, lay another, new and spacious, through which their spirits seemed free to expand down vistas of illimitable hope. The lightness of hill-air released imagination, the wideness of the land imposed no limits on its flight. They were alone, and joint possessors of a virgin earth in which even familiar places seemed too remote to have any claim on their uplifted hearts; so that the grey clot of smoke that hid North Bromwich, and all that yellowish pall beneath which the Black Country stifled, were to them no more material than the shadows cast by slow-sailing clouds that mottled the dun green of the south.

In the field beyond their gate they found a point of vantage, a grassy knoll, that might well have been a barrow. On the slope of this Ralph lay, with his head in her muslin lap, a grass-stalk between his teeth, lazily recounting the names of distant hills over which the clouds came sailing.

"That's the Black Mountain," he told her: "the flat line which drops like the edge of a pit-bank. Then comes the Forest. The Powyses have some grouse-shooting there. Nothing to shout about, George says. And just beyond that there's a grey hog's-back—you'd think it was cloud, but it isn't—that's where the Welsh water they're making such a fuss about is coming from."

"I know," she said. "There's a river there . . . "

"Of course there's a river. That's how they get the water."

"And that's how I got my name," she told him. "There are three rivers. One's called the Claerwen."

"A jolly name," he said. "It's just right for you. I suppose you and the river are the only Claerwens in the world. But I love to call you Clare all the same."

For the moment she did not hear him. She was thinking of what Thirza Rudge had told her: how Lydiatt and her mother had hidden themselves in those mountains, in that low, blue cloud, immediately after their romantic elopement. How adventurously happy they must have been! She wondered. . . . But by this time Ralph was asking her what the word Claerwen meant.

"It means clear-white," she said. "Do you think it's right for me?" She bent over and kissed him.

"White is all wrong," he murmured, through her kisses; "but clear . . . yes. That's the best part of you. One of them. You're as clear as spring-water. And I'm so thirsty, Clare."

So the hours passed in love-making, in quiet laughter, in long silences. Each moment, even their most trivial, seemed self-sufficient, lifted, by adoration above the ordinary computation of time. A heavier rank of cloud was blown between them and the sun; the western face of the hill on which they were seated became too chilly for comfort; so they left their barrow to go in search of tea. They found it in a cottage at the cross-road where the Halesby turnpike tumbles down into Bromsley hamlet, in a villainous little parlour which, even in that dry season, smelt of last winter's damp. When they had finished tea Ralph lit his pipe. Whenever she passed the door the cottage-woman looked in at them and smiled. Clare wondered if it would seem rude to close the door.

"You'd almost think she knew who we were," she whispered. Ralph laughed at her alarm: "It's only that she knows how happy we are, and wants a little of it for herself, poor dear!"

Toward sunset they descended the slope once more. By this

time the wind had fallen. The scents of fir and bracken lay low upon the hillside. It was so still that they could hear the rustle of the brake through which they moved and the clatter of pebbles that their feet dislodged. The squeal of a rabbit on which a stoat had sprung was echoed by the shrill call of a jay.

When Ralph told her the meaning of these sounds the wood became suddenly horrible to Clare. She took his hand as they hurried on together. The valley was cool and quiet as an empty well; its silence intent, as though the mill's broken windows were watchful eyes. They spoke, as by consent, with voices subdued to defeat the ears of listeners. Under the trees, above the noiseless water, midges hung in clouds. There was something in the place and in the moment that filled Clare with inquietude.

"Do let us go," she said. "I've no idea what time it is."

He laughed. "Neither have I. I left my watch at home on purpose."

His innocent wickedness disarmed her. "I'm sure it's late," she said. "I hate this place too; there's something wrong with it. Let's climb up over Uffdown and go home that way."

"I've something I want to show you first," he said mysteriously.

He wouldn't tell her what his secret was. Tempted by curiosity she allowed him to persuade her, to lead her down past the glassy fish-ponds toward the mouth of the valley.

"We're going miles out of our way," she reminded him.

"Miles," he agreed; "but it's still early, and we're nearly there."

"Nearly where?"

For answer he pointed to a white drive-gate, on the left of the road. He opened it for her, and they passed into a wood through which a wheel-track, brown with beech-mast, went winding like a brook in level fields. Behind them a vaffle gave its ringing laugh; before, a squirrel listened, with a beech-nut in his hands, then bounded off, trailing his feathery brush. The place had been secret enough indeed until they violated its sanctuary.

"But surely this must be the back-drive of Uffdown Manor?" Clare said.

He nodded silently.

"Then it's private: we're trespassing. I don't even know the Rentons. We'd better turn back."

"The Rentons left in June," he told her. "It's been empty for three months: nobody here but the gardener. You might trust me anyway."

The drive ended in a block of stables enclosing a square yard. The buildings were of red brick, with wrought iron windowgrills and toothed string-courses. A solemn clock-face, in the gable above their arched entrance, dictated order to the whole. As they approached, it chimed five, with long pauses between the strokes, which seemed to reprove Clare's impatience and insist on the futility of hurry.

"You see, we're not so late after all," Ralph said, and then, with a more lively interest: "Fourteen loose boxes. Solid, well-ventilated place. These old fellows knew what they owed to their horses. It beats Stourford hollow. Come along!"

They skirted the back of the house. "Don't look yet," he told her. "I want you to see it first of all from the front. Just shut your eyes and let me lead you."

He put his arm around her and she surrendered herself to his guidance. She guessed that they had crossed a gravel drive and thirty yards of turf. Then he stopped suddenly, kissed her eyes, and told her to open them.

Set against a background of tarnished elms and chestnuts she saw a miracle of sober loveliness: a Queen Anne manor, on

whose bricks some hoary lichen had dusted a silvery bloom. For all the mass of its three stories, the gravity of its horizontal lines, it seemed graceful and fragile; for the façade was lighted by rows of many-paned tall windows, with sashes and lattices painted white. To these, as also to the fluted pillars of the porch and the stone coping of the wide-angled central gable, the white sky gave an aspect of almost airy lightness. No cunning Georgian or Victorian had violated the design's virginity by the addition of wings or the planting of ivv or ampelopsis. The house stood there as it had been built, the creation of a wise and civilized taste; and the trees that sheltered it, chestnut and elm, and sycamore, had kept their distance, as though respecting its integrity, leaving it to emerge alone and unsullied from lawns as smooth as water, so smooth that they might almost have reflected the walls that rose from them.

Clare drew her breath with surprise and with delight. From every line of it there breathed an air of peace, of benevolence, of wise and settled happiness that neutralized the sinister mood which had overtaken her by the mill. They stood with arms about each other, surveying it in silence. One wide-armed cedar reached benignantly above them.

"I want you to see the rest while the light lasts," he said. "It's like our luck to have lost the sun."

A garden of clipped vews and long box-edged borders; within them Michaelmas daisies made a haze of amethyst. "I can smell lavender," said Clare. "And rosemary," he told her. He picked her a sprig of it, hued with the grey of evening; its odours strangely permeated the still air. I shall always remember this scent, she told herself. Remembrance . . .

The straggling September borders spent their opulence of old gold against a hazel hedge with cobs in clusters. Beyond it an orchard, knee-deep with aftermath, in which moon-pale apples lay where they had fallen. The trees were haggard and twisted with age. It seemed as if the hoary lichen that made the house etheral had spread its bloom on everything; so silvery, so unreal was the light. A brown owl whinnied in the coppice. They did not realize that the moon was in the sky.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Ralph said at last. "Will it do?" He spoke with a practical tone that broke her dream.

"I think it's the loveliest thing I've ever seen," she said. "Far better than Stourford."

"Oh, Stourford's a sham," he answered: "we all know that. And we're sham too; that's why it suits us so well. But this is the real thing. I've had a good look at it: been over her half a dozen times during the last month. How do you think it would do for us?"

"For us?" Against her will she had taken fright immediately.

"It's for sale. I thought of buying it . . . if you like it."

"But it's huge," she said. "I couldn't dare to think of it. And it's so beautiful. I should be afraid of spoiling it."

"You . . . spoil it?" He smiled at her. "And it isn't really big. I've been all over it. Of course it wants alterations, bathrooms and that. But the thing that took me most was the stabling: fourteen loose boxes, as I told you. And it's so handy for Wychbury—the station, I mean—when you want to box your horses anywhere." He changed his tone suddenly. "Clare, do you think we should be happy here?"

"You shouldn't ask me," she said.

"Then that's settled. I shall take it. I'll break the news to the guv'nor to-night."

"To-night?" Again her frightened instinct rose against him; but this time he was determined to have his way.

"Just let me tell Aunt Cathie first," she pleaded.

He had had enough of her reservations and was merciless. "You can tell as many people as you like," he said. "If one knows, everybody knows. I feel that I've got you at last!"

As they tramped back to Wychbury, their minds aflame with visions of that unimaginable future, the sky grew dark; for now that the wind had died the sailing clouds lost way and accumulated, obscuring the moon. By the time they reached the lights of the village the first drops fell. There followed a deluge of cold, hill-born rain that made Clare's flimsy sleeves cling to her shoulders. She grew alarmed, thinking not so much of the ruin of her frock as of the difficulty of concealing it from Aunt Cathie.

"I told you we were late," she said. "That clock must have been wrong."

"But you wouldn't have missed the Manor?"

"Of course not. This wretched muslin sticks so. I feel like a drowned rat."

He suggested that they should take shelter in the nearest cottage. At once her modesty was up in arms. "Everybody in Wychbury knows me," she said. He rallied her on her unreasonableness: "Even when we've got so far as choosing a house you still keep up these silly pretences."

"I know that I'm foolish," she said. "It's only that I can't get used to the idea all at once. You must be patient with me!"

The rain beat so persistently that she could not see to pick her way between the puddles that swamped her shoes. There was something triumphant and final about its savagery as though, in this sudden outburst, it had definitely accomplished the rout of summer and the ruin of the year. At that moment millions of leaves were being beaten to their death: by tomorrow they would lie sodden upon the mould of other years, to-morrow the trees would show their nakedness and the whole

face of the land be changed. In her soaked wretchedness it seemed to Clare that the nature of their passion must change with the destruction of the beauty on which it had been nourished.

Raising her eyes for one moment she saw the sky blackened by the squat tower of Wychbury church. It offered her a chance of pulling her thoughts together.

"We could shelter in here. It's sure to be empty; they never shut it till seven, and I don't think the rain can go on like this much longer."

The church door was unlocked. They entered together. As they advanced over the dry stone flags Ralph laid his hand on her arm. The wet sleeve clung so closely that through it his fingers could feel the softness and warmth of her skin. The sensation disturbed him. Out in that streaming twilight she had been no more than a presence; this intimate warm contact restored her body to him; but when he tried to take her in his arms she shivered and strained away from him.

"You're cold," he said; "you'd better take my coat."

"No, it's not that," she said, releasing herself.

She left him to find an explanation for himself. Dimly he saw her move to a pew on the south of the nave. She sank to her knees and crossed herself. Then, with bowed head, she knelt in silence.

He stared at her, full of wonder and a queer hostility. The jealousy with which her morning visits to St. Chad's had troubled him returned, in a more reasoned shape. He was ashamed of it. He told himself that he did not grudge her these religious emotions; they were a feminine weakness from which not even the rational Vivien was exempt; only he felt it a sacrilege—that was the word that occurred to him—that anything should take precedence of their love, and steal her

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from him. In that dim church, with its massive pillared nave, he found the stony strength of his enemy made visible. He wanted to pit his own strength against it.

And Clare, when she had finished her praying, knelt on, removed from him, torn in spirit, conscious of the hurt she had inflicted. She guessed the anger that was in his mind and longed to soften it; and yet she saw that her love and her religion, each of which claimed a complete devotion, were, for the moment, incompatibles. It had been a mistake to let Ralph enter the church at her side. Alone in St. Chad's, the contest had not presented itself so forcibly; now that she saw him baffled and glooming in the transept she knew that there was only one way in which the difference could be evaded: by keeping the two emotions in compartments rigidly separate. So she knelt on, desperately thinking, losing the consolation of either, while the rain hammered on the lead roof and thrashed the painted windows.

At last, mastered by sheer pity, she rose and joined him. She slipped her arm softly into his. He did not respond to this timid advance. He was afraid of her. There was a strangeness between them. He spoke in a hurt voice:

"It doesn't sound like stopping. If you're not too wet, I think

we might as well sit down for a minute or two."

"Of course." She wanted to make it clear that there was no difference, to reassure him; but as soon as she spoke the words sounded as if they had been addressed to an acquaintance, or at most, an ordinary friend. Once to admit this was to destroy the illusion of their love completely. She was silent, feeling that, for the present, nothing that she said could ring true. As they sat together she wondered what he was thinking. If their love had been all that she imagined she would have known. That was untrue. They loved each other as no two people had

ever loved before. It wasn't her fault. Ever since that moment at the mill some sinister influence had overhung them. And now it was getting late. Late, and so cold.

In the porch she heard a footfall, a sound of coughing and a wiping of feet. A quick alarm seized her. This was worse than ever; they were going to be locked in for the night. No, it couldn't be that: it was too early. But as she rose hurriedly the door creaked on its hinges. Somebody was coming in. An unreasoning panic took her; she was like a child discovered in some mischief. The empty church offered only one place of concealment: the staircase that led to the belfry, which pierced the massive tower in front of them. Into this slit-like opening she passed, and Ralph, wondering what madness she was up to, followed quickly. The air within was stony and stifled.

"My precious child, what do you think you're doing?" he whispered.

"Heaven knows, I don't," she whispered back. The ludicrousness of the whole situation overcame her. She began to laugh helplessly. "I ran in like a rabbit," she said. "It's too ridiculous!" And with that laughter they were themselves again, or entered once more the plane of their illusion. He knew it as well as she did. Standing on the step below, he put his arms about her, kissing her cool neck. With lips together they listened to the ping of the intruder's hobnails crossing the nave. A moment later she freed herself from his arms and vanished, ghostlike, up the spiral above him. He followed, wondering what new game of coquetry she was playing, and found her awaiting him, breathless, in the belfry. Above their heads the mouths of eight great bells yawned cavernously.

"I've never seen them before," she said. "How huge they are!"

Ralph struck a vesta and held it up to examine the gaping

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cups of bronze: the largest seemed at least four feet in diameter. Each was inscribed with elegant eighteenth century lettering. By matchlight he read the inscriptions and spoke them softly for Clare to hear.

"I . AM . THE . FIRST . ALTHOUGH . BUT . SMALL.
I . WILL . BE . HEARD . ABOVE . YOU . ALL.

I . SEND . TO . BED . THE . SICKE . REPENT. IN . HOPE . OF . LIFE . WHEN . BREATH . IS . SPENT.

I . TO . THE . CHURCH . THE . LIVING . CALL. AND . TO . THE . GRAVE . DOTH . SUMMON . ALL.

"Rather grisly, aren't they?" he said. "Some of them have initials at the end; but on this big chap there's something else." He struck another match. "Yes, I've got it: Aaron Hackett fecit. 1765. I wonder if that's an ancestor of Edward Willis? Hackett is their family name. Willis, Hackett and Willis. Hello . . ." He started suddenly. "What the deuce are they up to now?"

A rope tautened and scraped the hole in the oak floor through which it passed, communicating its movement to the mountings of the great bass bell whose inscription he had read last. There followed a groan of old wood in distress as the giant began to swing in its oak hanging, and then, as the clapper smote its concave bronze, a volume of sound so monstrous that it seemed as though their eardrums must give way. In that small chamber there was no room for anything but these cruel vibrations. They broke forth angrily, then swooped, swerved, hovered, searching each corner of the belfry for some living thing whose senses they might overpower.

Clare and Ralph stood deafened among these stormy waves of sound. A ringing-practice, she thought at first. She pictured Mr. Hemus and his ringers below, each man standing to his woolly rope. If one bell were so monstrous, a practice would be hell let loose in that restricted space. But when the last pulsation had died down to a meditative hum, like that of a great tuning-fork, there was silence for a moment. Then, suddenly the rasping and creaking began again. The bass bell swung. Once more the belfry was filled with a torment of sound.

"I can't stand this," Ralph shouted. "Come along." She saw his lips shape the words and followed him. The echoes pursued them malignantly down the spiral steps. He had been speaking and laughing all the time. Now, of a sudden, his voice became audible:

"It's a passing-bell," he was saying. "I suppose some poor devil's dead. It must be someone of importance, or they wouldn't do it at this time. I wonder who it is."

Again the great bell boomed. Clare felt once more the unaccountable dread that had crept over her by the deserted mill. But this time she knew the meaning of it. Her heart stood still.

"It's my grandfather," she said. "Oh, Ralph . . . "

He answered almost angrily: "Why do you imagine such things? I can't think what's wrong with you to-day."

"It's true," she said. "It's true. I know it. It's George Vigors, the sexton. He worshipped grandpapa. I know when it happened, too," she went on, as if she were speaking to herself. "Up at the mill: I felt there was something wrong. Oh, poor, poor Aunt Cathie!" She put her hands to her eyes and began to cry quietly. It was for Aunt Cathie that she cried; for pity, not for grief. For the second time that day he had to comfort her.

Emerging from the staircase door they saw the sandstone pillars of the nave illumined with a pale bloom of moonlight. The storm had passed. They left the church together. All

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through the village he took her arm, and now she made no protest. Soon they were climbing the steep lane to Pen House. Beneath them, in the mist that lay on Wychbury, the big bell went on booming, slowly, heavily, as befitted the death of an aged man.

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SHADOWS

In the middle of the afternoon, just before the falling of the breeze, Dr. Weir died. He died as he had lived: alone. On the tick of five, Mrs. Rudge, entering his room with a pot of tea and four fingers of dry toast, found him propped up in bed, with fallen jaw and eyes staring full into the empty orbits of the articulated skeleton which hung on the opposite wall and which his spare frame now so closely resembled. In the last moments his fingers had closed on the pages of his will, as though he had done his best to take it with him.

One look was enough for Thirza Rudge. She knew: for, in her time, she had buried a husband and five children. She put down the tea-tray, crossed the room on tiptoe, carefully closed his eyes, removed the will from his stiffening fingers, and folded the lean hands decently upon his chest. It would never 'a' done, she thought, for Miss Cathie to have seen him like that. Next she pulled down the blinds, as though she were dutifully concealing some indecency, and lit a candle, by the light of which she patted his nightshirt and bedclothes as if she were preparing him for some momentous interview. Then, the preliminaries of her office completed, she took a long draught of the unwanted tea, to steady herself, closed the door quietly

behind her, as though the old wolf might still snap at her for her clumsiness, and waddled away down the hall passage to find his daughter. As she went, she picked up her bunchy apron and mopped her eyes with it. "Poor dear lamb, too!" she sighed.

Aunt Cathie was "resting" in the drawing-room. She always rested in the afternoon when Mrs. Rudge was on duty. She was sitting in the low, waisted chair that she fancied; a little cylindrical cushion behind her neck; beneath her feet a bead-work stool with clawed feet. On her lap lay the antimacassar that the cushion had displaced and the embroidery frame over which her hands were folded. Her mouth was open. She slept so quietly that she scarcely seemed to breathe at all. But her eyes were closed. That was the difference. Otherwise, as Thirza confided later in the day to Mrs. Harbord, there wasn't a button to choose between the two of them. It was as if sleep and death had conspired to split the difference in years, to reduce the features of father and daughter, of middle age and senility, to one sinister mean. The likeness gave Mrs. Rudge a turn. She touched Aunt Cathie's shoulder. Aunt Cathie woke and fumbled for consciousness.

"Why, Thirza," she said, with a spurious air of briskness, "you came in so quietly that I never heard you! I was just wondering if you'd dropped off to sleep. It must be nearly five."

Thirza averted her eyes from the yawn that Aunt Cathie could not quite suppress.

"I've just taken in his tea, Miss Cathie," she said solemnly. "He's gone. Poor soul, too!"

"Thirza . . . What do you mean?"

She knew well enough what Thirza meant. The words were a protest springing instinctively from that part of her consciousness which, for five years and more, had disowned reality. Now this same instinct mustered all its strength to fight for time, to soften the blow by denying comprehension.

"He must have 'a' passed away a good half-hour since," said Thirza. "And now he's at peace, Miss Cathie, poor old body." Feeling her words inadequate, she added: "He's a lovely sight, Miss. I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't in his sleep."

Aunt Cathie rose unsteadily to her feet. The embroidery frame fell to the carpet. Thirza, breathing heavily, picked it up. In the mind of Aunt Cathie the dread word echoed emptily. Gone . . . gone! She could not hold it. In her brain there opened a core of central emptiness that spread its boundaries till it possessed the whole. She could not think; she could not speak; her mind was as blank as if she had died herself. This state was neither grief nor pity; it was annihilation. She stood there childishly, stupidly helpless. Thirza took her arm.

"Now, do 'ee set down," she cooed, "and I'll bring you a nice strong pot of tea. Thy will, not mine, O God," she added,

with apparent irrelevance.

The text meant nothing to Aunt Cathie. For years on end she had been stiffening her courage with props and stays of conscious effort, reinforcing the pride of her martyrdom with that iron sense of duty which was her substitute for religion. Within this formidable structure she had felt herself fit to face calamity with confidence, even though its grimness isolated her from the rest of her kind. And now, bewildered and only half awake, she saw this creation of wasted strength and sacrifice crashing to earth above her head. Her mind, adapted and fixed to the ideal of independence, continued its vain struggles, like the tail of a lizard that goes on twitching when it has been severed from the trunk; but her body, swayed by some deeper, physical source of energy, impelled her to seek refuge in Mrs. Rudge.

"Oh, Thirza, Thirza . . ." she cried.

And Thirza gathered into her arms this angular woman whose soft and childish limbs she had once fondled. Tears flowed over Thirza's old, puckered cheeks; her face was like a fondant melting in the sun; her lax mouth worked spasmodically.

"Don't 'ee, don't 'ee now," she cooed, relapsing into the idiom of Aunt Cathie's babyhood. "Don't 'ee, my handsome!"

For her the broken creature whose moods and asperities she had supported for years was now the child whom she had nursed in infancy: for Aunt Cathie Thirza's arms were once again a refuge and a protection. They clung together in the darkening drawing-room, comforted by that communion; two creatures, one of whom could hardly hope to live for many years, and one whose life was more than half spent, reduced to equality by the presence of death. Neither of them gave a thought to Clare. She belonged to another generation, immune from these sombre admonitions.

"He looks a rare treat," Mrs. Rudge moistly murmured at last. "I've seen a' many corpses in my time, Miss Cathie, but never a one that looked more lovely than the doctor. Innocent as a babe unborn: that's what he do look!" She took Aunt Cathie's arm. "Now do 'ee come along of me, Miss, and have a peep at him."

Aunt Cathie shuddered: "Not, now, Thirza, not yet," she said desperately. She pulled her wits together. "We must do something at once."

Even to the macabre mind of Thirza this proposal was a relief. She became at once a counsellor of experience who knew the moves of the game.

"I'll send that Ellen down along to my friend," she said.

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Even in this emergency the taboo of Mrs. Harbord's anonymity must be respected. "She makes a regular business of laying them out. She's a knowledgeable woman, and clean as paint. Many's the time she's said to me, Miss Cathie: 'Night or day, Mrs. Rudge, it's all the same, I'll come for the doctor.' Then old Jabez had better run off for Mr. Wilkins. I mind the doctor saying that Wilkins had 'a' got his measure—he'd always have his joke, poor soul, too!—but I reckon Mr. Wilkins 'ld like to have a squint at him just the same . . . and, my dear life! if I wasn't forgetting the mourning and the gloves."

"Ellen had better call at the post-office too," Aunt Cathie murmured dreamily. "I must let Mr. Wilburn know at once."

Mrs. Rudge did not hear her. She had just discovered that the blinds were not pulled down. She waddled to the window and lowered them scrupulously. Aunt Cathie, suppressing a movement of irritation, scribbled her wire to Wilburn in the dark. Thirza took it from her and disappeared.

For a long while Aunt Cathie stood aimlessly in the middle of the room. Outside, rain had begun to fall. The sound of it, pattering on the ivy and lashing, in sudden gusts, the blinded window-panes, evoked a memory of all the years of fortitude and repression that she had suffered there. Now all that central portion of her life was blank confusion, a waste from which the purpose had gone. She could not focus the details of a monotony so vast; only its general greyness and triviality survived. For half her life she had been bound to their barren futile routine. Now she was free, and her freedom promised an equal sterility. Too late, too late . . . Awed and disconcerted by the future, her mind clutched backward at past happiness. She saw herself sitting at the piano with Lydiatt bending over her, his hands on hers, his face pressed against her cheek. She shiv-

ered at the remembrance. There, in the doorway, Sylvia smiled and mocked her. Sylvia or Clare. Poor little Clare! Clare too, in the end, must come to this. Everyone—everyone. . . . The darkness was full of ghosts, and life as ghostly as death. Ruthlessly undoing Thirza's pious labour she pulled up the blind. And still the rain fell drearily in the twilight.

An instinct more deeply rooted than these reflections reminded her that the antimacassar that she had folded on her knees before she slept lay rumpled on the floor. She picked it up, and smoothed it, and replaced it. She punched the indented cushion into shape and put it on the sofa to which it rightly belonged. She placed the chairs in proper order, and closed her writing-desk. The tea-tray? How stupid of her! Thirza had not brought it.

When the mechanical workings of her brain were satisfied that all was in order, she passed out into the dim hall and surveyed it with the scrupulous care of ordinary days, remembering Ellen's perverse habit of leaving the carriage umbrella on the wrong side of the entrance and stowing her goloshes under a chair instead of in the cupboard. And all the time her ordered progress was bringing her nearer to the doctor's door which she always entered at this hour. Each afternoon of late she had opened it with an awed uncertainty. Now the uncertainty had vanished, but the awe was more terrible than anything she had known or imagined. Sooner or later the dreadful moment must be faced. She could not face it alone, like this. Why had she rejected Thirza's wise and kindly offer to escort her? She could not bring herself to go and find Thirza in the kitchen; for, if she did so, she knew that she would cry. She stood there for a moment helpless, paralysed. Then, with a supreme effort of courage, she composed her trembling lips and passed inside.

BLINDS DOWN

AS Clare turned the corner of the drive, the two black Wellingtonias, wakeful in moonlight, gave a sudden shudder and rained upon her head drops that were like heavy tears. The long house lay silent and placid as ever; a light was burning, as usual, behind the blinds of the doctor's room. It seemed to her that if he were really dead that light would have been extinguished. And vet she knew. She knew with an increasing certainty as she hurried through the empty hall and crept upstairs to change her sopping clothes; but even into that sanctuary the unusual quality of the silence penetrated, so that when once she had reached it she was loth to leave it, for fear of encountering someone who would tell her the dreadful truth. The thought of such a meeting and the agony of finding words to deal with it were enough to bring her to the verge of tears; and that seemed strange, for she was honest enough to remember that she had never really loved her grandfather nor thought of him as anything but an alien and neutral figure, a presence rather than a man.

It struck her suddenly that, at least, she ought to pray. She knelt beside her bed and besought God for the rest of his soul. As she prayed she thought how he would have hated it; she could almost hear his short, destructive laugh; and yet the action mysteriously steadied her. When she rose from her knees she knew that it was her plain duty to go and find Aunt Cathie and share as much of the burden as she might be allowed to bear. Fortified in this resolution she made a tour of the desolate house in search of her. She visited the dining-room, the drawing-room, even Aunt Cathie's bedroom in vain. As she stood hesitating at the doctor's door, it opened quietly, as though moved by some spiritual mechanism, and Aunt Cathie herself appeared.

This was the critical moment, in which, it had seemed to Clare, both of them must be involved in some unbearable tenderness. They stood in the dusk of the narrow passage, each blocking the other's way.

"Aunt Cathie, dearest," Clare began, then stopped; she could say no more.

"Is that you, Clare?"

Aunt Cathie's voice was firm and unemotional.

She could only answer: "Yes." The syllable sounded feeble and pathetic. She had come to this encounter with an open heart, prepared to prove herself, to fulfil the utmost demands that could be made upon her affection; she had not doubted that Aunt Cathie would receive her with an equal frankness and generosity. Evidently she was mistaken. The silence that followed made her feel not so much hurt as foolish.

But Aunt Cathie's moment of weakness had passed. During the half-hour that she had spent in that terrible room she had compassed the spiritual evolution of half a lifetime. At first she had sounded depths of desolation and despair, sobbing her heart out, like a lonely child, beside her father's bed. Even as she knelt there she had seemed to hear his voice in its strong, half-bitter kindliness: "Now, Catherine, no nonsense!" It was almost as if he had spoken the words aloud; and so potent, even in death, was the habit of discipline and submission, that she had controlled herself, stiffening her lips and putting her grief behind her with a fortitude that she knew the old man would have approved. Grimly the dead mouth smiled its approbation.

She left him, proud and determined to see the bitter business through, in a composure that neither Clare nor any other should be permitted to undermine.

"I didn't know that you had come in, Clare," she said. "I

suppose Thirza has told you?"

"I heard the bell tolling, dearest. I guessed," said Clare

softly.

"The bell? Ah, that must have been old George Vigors. He was devoted to him. The doctor saved his life." Aunt Cathie paused for a moment; then her hand dropped to the doorhandle again. "Would you like to go in and see him, Clare?" she said. "He looks so calm and peaceful. You needn't be frightened. If you like I'll come with you."

She was compelling herself, by a definite test of courage, to

enter the room again.

"Aunt Cathie, darling," Clare stammered. "I think I'd

rather not."

Before the words had left her lips she was afraid that Aunt Cathie would be offended, that she was transgressing some unwritten law. She was prepared to do anything that Aunt Cathie wished.

"If you think I ought to-" she hastily continued.

"No, no. If you don't want to there's no reason why you should," she answered, with a harshness that made Clare certain that she had committed an indiscretion.

"Aunt Cathie," Clare began again, "I'm so sorry I was out.

If I could have . . ."

"You couldn't have done anything. Nobody was with him. He

must have gone quite quietly in his sleep."

Even against this baffling negativity Clare's sense of pitifulness and duty drove her to another effort. Timidly she reached

out for Aunt Cathie's hand. It felt unresponsive and cold as ice. "Dearest," she said, "please tell me if there is anything I can do . . . anything at all."

Above their heads the front door bell startled them with an agitated jangle. For one second Aunt Cathie's cold fingers gripped Clare's hand; whether in surprise or in a shy, painful recognition of her offer she could never tell; then she left Clare and hurried to the door. Outside in the moonlight, dumb with knowledge of her importance, the daughter of the Wychbury postmaster stood waiting with a wire. Aunt Cathie tore it open and read it rapidly. "Thank you, Jinny, no answer," she said. The girl still hesitated. "Father told me to tell you, Miss, that if there was anything . . ."

Aunt Cathie smiled bleakly, crumpling the telegram in her fingers.

"There's nothing, thank you, Jinny," she said. "Please tell your father that there's nothing at present."

She closed the door. "It was kind of Mr. Martin," she said; "you can see how they all respected him. Mr. Wilburn is coming down by the seven-forty. Please tell Thirza that we'll have supper at half-past eight. And ask her to tell Jabez to meet the train. If you don't mind," she added, with an unusual, inexplicable courtesy that made Clare feel like a stranger without obligations.

Bewildered by the suddenness of her dismissal she took her message to the kitchen. She found Thirza Rudge sitting on a high-backed chair at the side of the range. The light of an oil lamp which she had for once neglected to trim illuminated her solemn, sagging features. For all her comfortable plumpness she looked broken and dreadfully old. Her reading-glasses lay in their case on the table beside her. On her apron reposed the open Bible over which she invariably went to sleep on Sunday

afternoons. She sat there in state, waiting for the arrival of Mrs. Harbord. It was just so that her friend would expect to find her. The appearance of Clare with her messages disturbed this setting. Thirza sighed, and rose heavily from her chair.

"Well, that's a comfort, my dear," she said. "At a time like this you do need one man in the house, and the doctor, poor lamb, he can't help hisself. My dear life, it's a marvel how quick these telegrams do go. I reckon Postmaster Martin must have put it through with his own hands. But then, you can't do less than oblige at these times, and that's a fact! Everyone, no matter who, must put their shoulder to the wheel."

"Oh, Thirza, I wish I could do something," Clare cried.

"Something for poor Aunt Cathie, I mean."

Thirza Rudge shook her head. "Miss Cathie's her father's daughter, my dear," she said. "I do know them, as I'd ought to. The best thing you can do is to keep out of their way, like any mouse. Now where can that slow coach Ellen have got to? Running round from house to house like a flipperty-gibbet, I reckon. I shouldn't wonder if the little toad hasn't gone to Wilkins's first, instead of my friend's, like I told her. The mourning can wait, sure enough, but you can't put off the laying-out. Well, he was a fine man, the doctor. There's not a many of our sort left, my dear. I'm seventy-two, next January that comes. Seventy-two, my dear! Now what was that you were saying about supper?"

She put the Bible handy for emergencies and faced the prac-

tical aspects of the situation.

"Half-past eight. Well, I don't suppose Miss Cathie'll have much of an appetite; but Mr. Wilburn, he's always hearty, and I reckon the train journey'll have made him peckish. Now be a good girl, Miss Clare, and save my legs by telling old Jabez."

There he sat in the leathery smell of the harness-room, polishing the hames of the horse's collar. He had always seemed to her old and shrunken, but the weight of this calamity seemed to have compressed him to a drier gnomishness. How old they all were, these people of Pen House! So old that on them the presence of death must fall with a heaviness that she could not appreciate. Often as a child she had been rather frightened of Tabez with his crusty tongue and the air of importance that he assumed in the province that was under his command. Often he had made her feel as guilty as a marauding bullfinch. Now she could only see him as he was: a little, bent old man, polishing his hames in a pitiful attempt to forget the shadow that lay already on the house, and, with each hour, advanced in his direction. He was so absorbed that he did not notice Clare's approach. When he saw her he rose quickly and touched his cap. It was as if the doctor's death had invested her with a new importance in his eyes.

"Yes, Miss," he said. "Certainly, Miss. The seven-forty. Time and enough to spare."

He hurried to reach down the harness. She saw him stretching up his frail, bent back. He went on muttering: "Yes, yes . . . seven-forty," to himself. Then, suddenly, his crushed brain took courage. "Miss Clare, Miss," he wheezed, "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything. He was a good man, the doctor. A proper gentleman. There bain't many of his sort left nowadays. Seven-forty. Very good, Miss."

With her sense of helplessness unabated Clare shut herself up in her room. By this time the sky had cleared to a mellow, moonlit loveliness. The rain had ceased its dropping from the shrubbery trees: the wind had died. It seemed as if all the animate green things that the old man had planted for his pleasure were holding themselves in attitudes of mute and reverent grief

or wonder. Their stillness, their silence, was sentient and a little eerie. She could not bear to look for long at these humanised, intimate things; their attitude was too near, for her comfort, to that of the poor old man whom she had just left in the stable.

Beyond the moon-frosted branches of the orchard she saw the vast, soft outline of Pen Beacon. Here, at last, stood something big enough to be impervious to mortality. The great hill rose and dreamed above the plain, even as it had stood since the Arenig glaciers had moulded it and bared its contours to the stars. There was the unchanging skeleton of earth made manifest. Clare gazed and held her breath. I will lift mine eyes unto the hills. . . .

Gazing thus idly, and gathering from her dreamy contemplation some measure of the hill's impressive calm, she marked the fleece of fir that spilled itself downward from the summit into the Stourford valley. Ever since the first strokes of George Vigors' passing-bell, even in the moment of his kisses at parting, the thought of Ralph and the day's adventures had vanished from her mind. Now, in seeing the very shoulder of hill that met the Stourford chimneys, it suddenly and overpoweringly returned.

That day, from start to finish, had marked a momentous period in their love. Ralph's stratagem of the visit to Uffdown Manor had transported their ideal love-making to a practical plane. The cool definiteness of his proposals had shown her that their marriage, an event that she had been content to regard as distant and visionary, was near and practicable. On their way back to Wychbury her reason had compelled her to accept his new conditions. One spasm, indeed, of the old panic had disgraced her in the church; but when, in the belfry, she recovered herself, she had realized her folly and determined to struggle no more. Though the step was logical and inevitable, her submission filled her with an excitement in which the prospect of a new liberty and the romantic possibilities of Uffdown Manor were mingled. Her mind glowed and expanded in a new dignity. She could not help thinking how childish and ineffective her previous reservations had been.

For a moment she surrendered herself to the intoxication of this mood; it seemed at first to gather strength and lustre from the sombreness of her surroundings; but, in a little while, the brightness began to fade. Her conscience told her that her exultation was selfish and sinful: that she had no right to be so happy; that her attitude should have been one not of triumph but of humility. Slowly, inexorably the contrast bore down upon her, compelling her to compare her lot with that of the human beings who surrounded her: her youth with their age, her vivid life with their mortal admonitions, her new-born ecstasy with the grimness of their distress. It was unbearable; she could have cried to think of it; and yet, perversely, she was happy.

The subdued summons of the supper-gong reached her from below. At that moment any distraction of movement was welcome to her. She tidied herself and went down. Now, more than ever, the house seemed stricken by a consciousness of death. At the foot of the stairs the old clock ticked solemnly. She remembered that last Sunday her grandfather had wound it. His hand had generated the strength that the rocking pendulum slowly released. There in the tension of coiled springs a part of the dead man's energy still survived. The swift thought made her shudder. It was sinister, unnatural. She hurried away from it, frightened in the dark.

Aunt Cathie and Wilburn were already seated at table in their accustomed places on either side of the doctor's chair. Wilburn rose to salute her with a suppressed cheerfulness. Aunt Cathie seemed infinitely more at ease. A trifle pale, but marvellously composed, she spoke in a quiet voice of ordinary things. Sometimes she even smiled, but with a queer self-consciousness and pride, as if she realized that the doctor would have approved of her smiling. All through the meal the three of them were as conscious of that empty chair as if the old man had been sitting in it. One after another they glanced toward it and lowered their eves.

Neither Clare nor Wilburn could help admiring the virtuosity of Aunt Cathie's courage. It was the mark of a proud, superior spirit, schooled and self-contained. How different, Clare thought, from that of the unfortunate Ellen, who, breathless still from scouring the village on her tremendous errands. had lost her head completely and waited on them with a dazed stupidity that, on any other occasion, would have driven Aunt Cathie frantic.

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After supper they gathered round the fireless grate; and there, again, the doctor's chair surveyed them with a quiet, cynical interest. Aunt Cathie persisted in discussing business details; the proving of the will, the funeral arrangements. Clare sat and listened in silence. There was no reason why she should have stayed in the room. She hated it. And yet she felt it would be cowardly to leave them. All through the evening the brutal, realistic words that fell from Aunt Cathie's lips wounded her; but whenever she winced at them it seemed to her as if her grandfather smiled. She wondered, mysteriously, if now he was able to read their unspoken thoughts. How it must satisfy his grim sense of humour to see them playing up to his ghostly presence like this!

Wilburn was admirable. Never before had Clare realized the power and clarity of his well-ordered brain. He spoke little, and yet his skill, his tact, his kindliness, were ready, on the instant, to deal with every problem that Aunt Cathie presented to him. He was so different, in every way, from Ralph, that his attractiveness was all the more remarkable. How jolly, Clare thought, it would be to have a man like that for a brother! It was curious that neither she nor Aunt Cathie had ever known that relationship. With her, of course, it was unnecessary: in Ralph she had found completeness of adoration and companionship. But poor Aunt Cathie . . .

Once more Aunt Cathie's desolation saddened her. Her courage failed; she felt that, after all, she would be driven to retreat; but at that moment when she had resolved to do so Thirza Rudge tapped at the door to tell them that Jabez was waiting, and she was saved. The firm handclasp of Wilburn steadied her, it was as though his straight eyes said to her: "Be brave, be brave!"

Confirmed in this vicarious strength she forced herself to wait at the foot of the stairs for Aunt Cathie's return. Aunt Cathie came back, grey and haggard, but as composed as ever. Clare threw her arms round her neck and hugged her. It was only by this instinctive gesture that she could relieve the conflicting stresses that distorted her heart. Aunt Cathie yielded passively to this hot embrace. Then, gently releasing herself, she kissed Clare's forehead.

"Good-night, my child," she said. And that was all.

5

EPITAPH

THEY buried him, the proud old infidel, in the Nonconformist cemetery at Stourton. Not that Mr. Pomfret would have

denied him the last hospitality of consecrated ground. On the contrary, the Vicar resented this deliberate post-mortem discourtesy. Whether he liked it or no, the old man had been one of his parishioners. He could prove it, geographically, by maps. After all, Dr. Weir and he were both gentlemen, and it was understood that, after death, the differences of gentlemen ceased. He could only deprecate, in a dignified way, the behaviour of one who persisted in maintaining his feud beyond the grave. Without the least thought of a burial fee he was hurt by the perversity and ill manners of a social equal who could instruct his executor to have him buried among the dissenters. To have chosen a Parsee tower of silence would have shown a greater sense of decency. And Mrs. Pomfret, naturally, agreed with him. He begged her particularly not to mention their feelings to any outsider. Their conduct in the matter, at least, must be beyond reproach.

Dudley Wilburn had been appointed sole executor. On his way back from Wychbury he had glanced at the will which Mrs. Rudge had taken from the dead man's hands. He himself had planned the first draft; but, since that time, the document had been so mutilated by erasions and codicils that it had lost its shape and intention, leaving little of the original but the clause which insisted on the absence of religious ceremony—"mummery" had been the doctor's own suggestion—and that which appointed him to the executor's office. From these two paragraphs the old man's spirit flared its last protest against the ignorance of superstition and the capacity of women to manage

their own affairs.

The funeral party drove down from Pen House in two hired carriages. Aunt Cathie, Wilburn and Clare occupied the first, Thirza, Ellen and old Jabez followed. Ellen, from start to finish, dissolved behind a black-bordered handkerchief which

her mother had saved from some forgotten obsequies; Jabez, confused by his black clothes and his sudden transference from the box to a cushioned seat inside, held himself upright and intense, as though he were still responsible for the guidance of the horses. Thirza, in the glory of as much crape as would festoon a catafalque, her pink face glowing with appreciation of a well-run affair in which her experience entitled her to be considered the principal performer, sat forward, alert as a dog, noting with interest and satisfaction the avenue of drawn blinds through which they passed down the length of Wychbury village. As they came abreast of one of the last windows a corner of the blind was lifted, and she gave a sigh of content, for she knew that her friend had seen her stately passage.

Even in the first of the funeral carriages there was no community of feeling. To the mind of Aunt Cathie, now numbed by reaction from the strain which she had borne so bravely, this drive seemed futile and purposeless. If they had taken her, not to Stourton, but to the ends of the earth, she would not have protested. Only at Wychbury cross-roads, where a little group of the doctor's club-patients stood waiting in the drizzle with bared heads, did she become, for one moment, capable of feeling; and even then her emotion was not so much one of grief as of pride in her father's virtues, in the probity, the generosity, the ruthless kindliness which they remembered and she remembered too. They didn't realize that the man to whom they paid this final tribute of respect had died eight years ago, on the day of his first stroke. Nobody but she and Wilburn, her confidant, realized that. She wondered if Wilburn knew what she was thinking.

Whatever he may have thought, the face of Wilburn showed no signs of feeling. His full-skirted frock-coat, buttoned high on the chest, his dead black Ascot tie, his tall hat, dulled by a three-inch band of crape, seemed to contribute to the impersonal, professional grimness of his figure. He was no longer a friend but a uniformed legal functionary, playing his part in the sombre ceremony with a propriety and an efficiency which equalled that of Mr. Wilkins, the undertaker, seated on the box in front of them.

Wilburn's mouth was set with more than its accustomed firmness; the solemnity of black clothes was reflected in his rigid features, in the concentrated steadiness of his eyes.

Clare had never before been so deeply impressed by him. He looked so handsome too, in his funeral magnificence, that she was almost afraid of him. It seemed impossible that this was the jolly companion who, in Aunt Cathie's absence, had joked and laughed with her on equal terms. Perhaps she had only imagined this relation. It were better so; for it would be shameful to think of poor Aunt Cathie having been deceived. Clare's heart went out to this mute, unknowable creature.

She dared not look at Aunt Cathie for fear of crying, nor at Wilburn, lest her glances should betray their guilty intimacy. She sat with lowered eyes as the procession paced slowly through the village and, as they left it, broke into a cheerful trot. But as they jogged through the rich hues and scents of the autumnal lanes, she was conscious, all the time, of the letter from Ralph which she had received that morning, just before they left Pen House. She could feel its uneven pressure within her black bodice, where she had hurriedly stowed it, and, in her brain, its phrases kept on forming themselves, as if they had been burnt upon it to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

My own darling (he had written),

Until I' heard the news this morning I couldn't believe that you were right. I went up to the chapel just the same, but you weren't there. Clare, I can't put down a thousandth part of what I think. I

never knew him as you did, but everyone seems agreed what a fine man he was. Anyway, he was your grandfather, and that's enough for me. Now I must ask you to forgive me. You will, my sweetest, I know you will. The thought of you all alone in that miserable place was too much for me. I couldn't bear it any longer, so I went into the library to the guv'nor after dinner, and told him all about us, as we arranged. Don't be alarmed. He was quite reasonable about it, agreed that I was my own master, etc., etc. Of course he doesn't know you, or he'd have been delighted. Vivien was, in her funny, off-hand way. She said it wasn't any news to her. I left it for the guv'nor to tell mother. I suppose they'll have a family council over it.

Oh, my sweetheart, I can't bear you to be alone. I rode half way to Worcester this afternoon, but it's no good. I can't be happy till I take you in my arms like I did yesterday when you were frightened. That's the only thing that matters, Clare, for us two to be together. I don't want to disturb you, darling, at a time like this, but I must see you. I want to take you away right out of it, Clare. Oh, my love, my love, how I do love you.

Ralph.

PS.—I can't bear it much longer, Clare. I shall come to Pen House to-morrow evening, and then, my darling, oh, then . . . R.

And then, oh then. . . . The lyric words went singing through Clare's mind, so clearly, so triumphantly, that it seemed as if her mute companions must hear them. She glanced at them timidly; both faces were blankly set in the same sombre mould. Aunt Cathie's head was swaying from side to side with the movement of the carriage as if it didn't belong to her; and as Clare watched it, absorbed and fascinated, she began to realize that all the raptures of which Ralph's letter had persuaded her to dream were conditioned by her duty toward Aunt Cathie's loneliness. However easy their marriage might seem to Ralph this new factor must be considered. Aunt Cathie, she told herself, had devoted to her the best part of a life. It would be selfish and cruel to desert her, as Ralph so lightly proposed, at a moment when the world had fallen in ruins about her. Mon-

strous and impossible. So, out of her dream, the thought of Aunt Cathie's desolation snatched her ruthlessly backward. "She has been patient for years," Clare told herself, "now I must show her that I can be patient too." But Ralph? The preaching of patience to the author of that ardent letter was another matter.

Little by little the pressure of these sobering facts reduced her spirits to the general level. By this time they had skirted the prim suburbs of Stourton. They passed the red sandstone church in which she had been confirmed. The sight of it awakened in Clare no ecstasy of reminiscence. The sky above them was shrouded in yellow fog, thin edge of the monstrous coverlet that the fires of the Black Country are always brewing. They penetrated a zone of brickyards, glass-works, and claypits. A smell of burning earth and cinders embittered the air. On the edge of the clay-pits Clare saw an open field in which were ranged on end, row after row, the china baths by whose exploitation that little market town had been debauched. They stood there like uniform tombstones in a cemetery, reminding her of their grim errand, which she had almost forgotten. The hillside beyond them had broken out into an angry rash of uniform red-brick cottages. Through these they passed at a trot, the carriage wheels jolting and grating over unrolled clinkers. Slatternly women came to their doors in aprons, shouting for their neighbours not to miss the spectacle. The place was bleak and sterile as the grave itself.

At last the carriages pulled up before an ugly iron gate slung upon massive pillars faced with terra-cotta. Clare rose hastily to descend; but Mr. Wilkins called on her to wait. This was the moment of his apotheosis; he was the mystagogue; they sat and waited on his instructions. They saw him run forward to the closed coupé attached to the hearse. From it four satellites

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emerged. They wore long frock-coats, like Mr. Wilkins, and small black skull-caps. Wilburn rose and gave his hand to Aunt Cathie. She dismounted, and Clare followed her. As she stood there beside them Catherine knew that it was no use fighting any longer. Bereft of thought, bereft of everything but feeling, she collapsed into desolate tears.

6

CONFIDENCES

WHEN they returned to Pen House they found a bright fire burning and tea already laid on the dining-room table. No ordinary tea either; for Mrs. Harbord, once having witnessed her friend's triumphal passage, had trudged up through the rain and taken possssion of Thirza's kitchen. There she had baked hot scones for the occasion, and set the table out with all the best of the silver, cakestands and salvers, and the Queen Anne tea-set that Thirza cleaned weekly, on Fridays, but had never presumed to use in all her forty years of service. This she had placed at the head of the table, opposite the doctor's chair, which, since his death, had been left vacant as by consent; and round it, gleaming in a comfortable lustre of blue and gold, she had ranged the Crown Derby tea-things that were the pride and anxiety of Aunt Cathie's life. At the other end of the table, plump, crisp and golden, stood the ham on which Thirza's respect for local custom had insisted.

Obedient to Mrs. Harbord's knowledge of tradition, Aunt Cathie took the place that was assigned to her. Her eyes were still red with crying, and yet, as she poured out, she began to talk with a challenging sprightliness that was half bravado and half the dissembled symbol of a genuine relief. Wilburn accepted her challenge clumsily; he began to make little jokes with Clare, teasing her, as though she were still a schoolgirl. He had not treated her in that way for months, and yet, on this occasion, his lame humour had the effect of putting them all at ease. Aunt Cathie smiled at him as he teased. They talked like people who have come home from a dance in the small hours and are tempted to easy laughter by consciousness of others sleeping above their heads. They were all of them hungry, too, and this running-fire of conversation enabled them to conceal the shame of their natural appetites.

When they had finished tea, Aunt Cathie turned to Clare and said in a significant whisper: "Clare dear, if you'd like to, there's no reason why you shouldn't go upstairs and change"; which meant that from Aunt Cathie's point of view there were urgent reasons why she should. She went obediently; evening was falling; and then, oh then . . . It was almost as if Aunt Cathie had guessed that she did not want to meet Ralph in her

mourning.

Wilburn and Aunt Cathie sat solemnly on either side of the fire while Ellen cleared the table. Then Wilburn asked if he might smoke. And Cathie assented hurriedly. It was the first time she ever remembered anyone smoking at Pen House; the doctor, having no taste for tobacco, had always preached against it as a poison. What would he think of this easy desecration of his favourite room? And what would Thirza think? Aunt Cathie was becoming a little cautious of Thirza as a tyrant of the old régime; but she liked to see Wilburn sit there lighting his pipe in that homely way; it gave her a thrill of emancipation and daring to have permitted it.

"I don't want to bother you with business," he began.

"It won't bother me," she assured him, "I'm not the least bit tired. If there is anything special . . ."

"It's usual, on these occasions," he said, "to read the will. Of course, in this case, there's no need for that. I expect you know what's in it?"

"I've not the least idea. He was always very mysterious about it, particularly just lately. He never spoke of its contents; so, naturally, I didn't ask him. He wouldn't have liked it. He didn't even tell me that he had appointed you his executor. Perhaps you'll be good enough . . . not to read it . . . just to explain."

"There's nothing much to explain," said Wilburn, turning the pages. "His first intentions were simple enough. Latterly he seems to have become less sure of what he wanted. During the last year he's added no less than five codicils. They're all quite properly attested by Mrs. Rudge and Jabez. Only one of them is really important."

"He was always getting them in to sign something or other," Aunt Cathie smiled. "He used to frighten them out of their lives."

"Well, I'll just give you the gist of it," said Wilburn. He put aside his pipe and leaned forward in the doctor's chair. "First of all, comes the clause we've already acted on; his objection to being buried with any religious ceremony. It's a curious thing, isn't it, that a man so reasonable as he was should have taken the trouble to express all these prejudices of his in his will?"

"He felt very strongly."

"I know. And yet he must have been aware that nobody was likely to read all this—there's a whole page of it—but you and me. Perhaps it gave him a sort of satisfaction to think that even after his death his opinions would survive on paper."

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"He felt very strongly," Aunt Cathie repeated. She thought it her duty to take the old man's part against this posthumous criticism.

"That shows itself later," said Wilburn. "Do you want me to read that clause?"

"No. There's no need. I know exactly what he thought. Suppose you just give me an idea of what follows."

"Very well," said Wilburn. "He was not a wealthy man."

"I know that."

"Not nearly as wealthy as he gave us all to understand. Of course he showed great wisdom in his investments."

"You advised him."

"Yes. But he didn't always take my advice. Sometimes he was wiser, much wiser than me. First of all there's the house. That will have to be valued for probate. I suppose you will want to go on living in it?"

"Here? Oh, of course." The idea of an uprooting made Aunt

Cathie shudder. "I couldn't dream of leaving it."

"Still, you have to count it as part of your income. Then here is a complete schedule of his investments. He lost a good deal of money last year. Perhaps he didn't tell you? There remains a number of securities, mostly industrial shares, representing a capital of, roughly, nine thousand pounds. The bulk of them are Sedgebury Main Preference. You remember we came to a decision about those the other day. They'll produce an income, at present, of just under four hundred pounds."

Aunt Cathie shook her head. "You'll think me stupid," she said, "but that means nothing to me. I've never had anything to do with money. He handled all the bills himself. I suppose

it'll be enough to live on?"

"At your present rate of living it's ample. If the Colliery shares develop, as I think they will, you'll have money to spare."

"Well, let's be thankful for that," Aunt Cathie sighed. "It's been very good of you."

"But wait a moment; I haven't finished," said Wilburn, with a smile. "I haven't hold you yet how the money is left."

"I'm sorry." She blushed. In that moment of timidity he could almost have declared that she was pretty. "You see," she went on hurriedly, "I thought you were executor and had to do all that. You know I trust you so absolutely . . . just like he did. . . ."

She stopped, and he, to cover her embarrassment, made haste to continue:

"First of all, there are a number of small legacies to servants. His clothes to Jabez and three years' wages; the same sum of money to 'my devoted servant, Thirza Rudge'; a year's wages to Ellen Higgins. Medical books and instruments to Mr. Lloyd Moore. That's curious; I don't suppose their value can be anything but sentimental. No bequests to charity. He says: 'I consider that my work through forty years of practice in Wychbury represents the whole of my obligation to humanity.'"

"That's true," Aunt Cathie murmured. "He gave up his whole life to that."

"Then comes the curious part. Originally he had divided the residue of his estate in equal portions between 'My daughter, Catherine Weir, and my granddaughter, Claerwen Lydiatt, absolutely.' Then, in a codicil dated—let me see—the seventeenth of June, 1897—that is this year—he revokes the whole of his bequest to Clare." Wilburn paused.

"I don't quite understand," said Aunt Cathie quickly. "You mean that Clare gets nothing?"

"Nothing. Not a penny. The codicil gave me a shock. He must have changed his mind three months ago. It seems so unlike him."

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Again Aunt Cathie blushed. "It is unlike him," she cried. "You've no idea how just, how generous he was. But you remember, don't you?—I told you that he'd changed . . . after that last attack. He wasn't himself any longer, poor darling. We can't, we mustn't consider him responsible for this. Of course it can be altered."

"It can't be altered," Wilburn explained. "The will is perfectly valid and must be proved as it stands. What puzzles me is why his feeling toward Clare should have changed. I'm sure poor little Clare can't have done anything to deserve it. Do you think that in these last months he began to brood on that old business: Sylvia and Lydiatt?"

It was the first time that Lydiatt's name had ever passed between them. The sound of it threw Aunt Cathie's heart into a panic. With Wilburn, of all men, this was a subject that she could not bear to discuss.

"No, no," she said, "it wasn't that. I think I know what it means. When she was at St. Monica's, Clare got into the hands of some High Church woman or other who worried her into being confirmed. You know, it's quite common with schoolgirls, that emotional religious phase. Mr. Pomfret, the vicar, you know, passed her on to that man Darnay, the very type that the doctor hated most. She used to go every morning to early service at St. Chad's. You know how strongly he felt about all that sort of thing. Somebody must have influenced him." She hesitated.

"Poor kid!" said Wilburn, with a little laugh.

But as he laughed Aunt Cathie met his eyes, firm and judicial, staring straight into her own, and the meanness of her prevarication stood naked in their steady flame. The shame of having lied to him, the one man living in whose eyes she wished to appear at her best and truest, was insupportable. A wave of

redness swept upward; the blood beat in her temples; she was inspired, heroic in her need for absolute frankness in the humiliation of herself and the vindication of her father. Wilburn watched the emotion rising in her with alarm; her face was distorted with passion.

"No, that's not true," she said, "I'm not going to tell you a lie about it. It was I who told him. I couldn't help it. I know it was mean and horrible of me. I think I must have been mad. Now you know the very worst of my meanness. How you must hate me for it!"

There was no hatred in Wilburn's mind. He was only shocked and embarrassed by this sudden access of passion in a woman whose calmness and restraint he had always admired. There was something grotesque in Aunt Cathie's vehemence. At the end of her outburst she had fallen to her knees and clasped his hand in utter abandonment of weeping. He pitied her; he thought that this nervous collapse was nothing but the logical outcome of the intolerable degree of fortitude which she had shown him during the last three days. Sooner or later something must have given away. Now her resistance had flown asunder like a taut cable and left her a mass of bruised and lacerated nerves. For the moment he didn't even take her violent self-accusation seriously. Judged by the standards of his profession her offence was trifling, no more than the natural impulse of a woman sorely tried, who showed, by the very torture of her shame, her essential goodness. He took the hand with which she had clasped his and clumsily caressed it.

"My dear Cathie," he said, "you simply mustn't take it as hardly as this. You're overwrought. It's perfectly natural. Tomorrow, when you've had a good sleep, you'll see that it's not half as terrible as you imagine. Just now you can't possibly look at anything in its proper proportion." She went on weeping

bitterly. His hands were wet with her tears. A feeling of utter helplessness seized him. "Would you rather I left you and sent in Mrs. Rudge?" he said.

She only clung to him more tightly.

"No, no," she cried. "Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" Her tears had ceased, but her body continued to be shaken by hard, hollow sobs; her voice made a piteous whining noise like that which a dog makes in its dreams. "Can you ever forgive me?" she gasped. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, of course," he assured her. "There's nothing to

forgive."

"But Clare; she won't," Aunt Cathie sobbed. "She'll hate me for ever. And I do love her so!"

Gradually, with a patient, kindly insistence, Wilburn constrained her to raise herself from the ground. She lay back, trembling, shrunken, exhausted, in the doctor's chair. Gradually her raw features regained their composure.

Timidly glancing at him she began to speak.

"Of course I shall put things right," she said, "just as if the —what do you call it?—the codicil had never been made, that will be easy, won't it? There's nothing to prevent me giving her her share? Isn't there such a thing—I seem to remember —as a Deed of Gift? And if I do that, you see, there's no real reason—is there—why Clare should know about it. Nobody need ever know a word about it but you and me? Isn't that so?"

"Of course it's quite easy," he told her, "the important thing for the present is that you shouldn't worry your head about it. You've had more than enough trouble to go on with."

"And Clare needn't know?" she persisted.

"You can leave it all to me."

"If I thought that Clare was going to suffer . . ."

"She shan't. I'll promise you that."

"You're a good friend, Dudley," she murmured with a wan smile; it was the first time that she had used that name to him since the blow had fallen. It came to her lips quite naturally; but when she had spoken it, she was half afraid that her familiarity might have offended him. Evidently it hadn't. He bent over her and took her arm in a gesture more intimate than any of those which she had treasured. His voice was low and thrillingly gentle as he spoke:

"You need think no more about it," he said. "Now promise me that you won't."

Warmed and strengthened by the pressure of his hand, she gave her promise. This act of submission filled her with a rich, peculiar content. Wilburn pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. His fingers settled on her arm. From their contact a shiver of pleasure ran through all her body. The downward directed rays of the lamp were concentrated on the table; the shadow of Wilburn lay between so that she could not see his face.

"Now, that we're making confidences," he said quietly, "I want you to listen to some of mine. You say I'm a good friend to you. I hope and believe it's true. We ought to be friends, you know. After all, we've known each other, you and I, for more than twenty years. Looking backward, upon my soul, it seems like half a century! We're neither of us as young as we were, Cathie. A day like this reminds me that we belong to the older generation, and we've both seen ups and downs to show us what life is like. Still, I won't complain. I've had my share of happiness too. I don't think you ever knew my wife?"

"No," Aunt Cathie murmured. "I never even saw her. There was a sort of big gap at that time, wasn't there?"

He did not answer. "She was very young and sweet," he

went on softly. "Rather like your sister Sylvia. You remember, when I was a boy I was mad on Sylvia? Well, Edith was very much the same type; slim and dark and brilliant, and full of life. . . . We'd been married four years when I lost her. It was cruel. I thought I should never get over it. Such hope, such happiness; and then such desolation! Of course, Joyce and Evelyn were too tiny to realize. They don't even remember her. Perhaps it's a good thing. . . .

"And then they began to grow up. When they were quite little it didn't matter much. We had Edith's nurse, you know, an old body something like your Thirza: absolutely devoted and trustworthy. And I, of course, was so absorbed in my work that I scarcely ever saw them. I'm never quite at my ease with children. But now it's becoming more difficult."

He hesitated.

"You see, if the children had been boys," he went on, "it would have been more plain-sailing. The sooner small boys get their angles rubbed off them at school the better for everybody. A man has his own experience to fall back on and knows what he's about in dealing with his sons. But with girls it's different. The old woman's failing-you know just what that means—and sooner or later I shall have to pension her off. In any case, I don't think the society of very old people is good for young children. Particularly servants; even the best of them. What they want now is the influence and attention of somebody like their mother; a cultured woman of our own class. And that's not as easy as it sounds. It's a great embarrassment for a man of my age to have a governess in the house. Rather risky, too. I've no sister of my own, and my brother's a bachelor. You see the fix I'm in?"

Aunt Cathie assented breathlessly.

"Well, there you are!" he continued. "These children of

mine are getting beyond me. They're quite delightful; I adore them; but all the time I realize that it's impossible for me to do my duty by them. I've spoken to one or two people about it. Yes, you're the third. They all say that my obvious course is to marry again. That's all very well, Cathie. I can't just take it as easily as that. It's more than eight years since Edith died—the kids are nine and twelve—and in the meantime I've settled down into a regular old bachelor. I'm cautious, too. That's the penalty of being a lawyer. And in spite of my cautiousness, although you'd never believe it, I'm a romantic person. When I talk about my age, I know that it's really nonsense. I'm much younger than I pretend to myself. And so are you, too. You don't mind my talking on like this?"

"No, no," she said. "I take it as a compliment, an honour." Aunt Cathie's hand reached out to find his. He moved his arm, and she withdrew it timidly.

"So, during the last twelve months," he went on, "I've been turning this over and over in my mind, and trying to persuade myself that I'm not such a staid old man as I've imagined. Then, latterly, your father's business began to bring me frequently over here. I was glad to come. I admired the old man tremendously; I liked him for trusting me, and it made me feel younger to come right away from North Bromwich to a place where I'd often been when I was a boy. But that wasn't the only reason why I began to look forward to my visits here. . . . Cathie, can you imagine what I'm driving at?"

She held her breath. She could hardly trust herself to speak. The strained sweetness of the moment was intolerable.

"Tell me," she said at last.

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Wilburn laughed and rose to his feet. He moved away from her. Her heart yearned after him.

"My dear, I thought you'd have been clever enough to

guess."

She shook her head. She dared not look at him.

"It's Clare," he said.

Aunt Cathie drew her breath in a deep gasp. The blood left her head. Her mind was a whirlpool through which Wilburn's figure and the shapes of the familiar room swam monstrously. She put out her hands in front of her, as though to ward off a blow. Then they fell limp in her lap. The blood beat back into her brain with a rhythm of galloping hoofs. Her heart raced like a runaway horse, and she was whirled away with it. It was from a distance as remote as death that she heard Wilburn's voice clearing itself in the middle of a sentence.

"... that night when she came back from school," he was saying. "I wonder if you remember it? I'd always thought of her as a child before that. After all, that's what she was. We drove up from the station together in the dark. I noticed how fresh and eager she was; but so composed too. You remember how she came down to supper that night? Of course. ... You were a bit upset. She took my breath away; it wasn't only the likeness to poor Sylvia. And ever since then I've been thinking about her, and telling myself not to be a fool. A man of my age and a girl of eighteen! She's nearly nineteen, isn't she? Well, that's not quite so bad. And in some ways, too, she's old for her years. There's a kind of quiet strength about Clare. It must have taken some courage to break away from you all over this religious business: that's what I thought when you told me. And now I don't try to

deceive myself any more. I'm in love with her, and I want to marry her."

He stopped, as if he were aware of something unusual in her silence.

"You don't say anything," he began.

"I can't," she answered. "I don't know what to say. Such a thing has never entered my mind."

Her voice was as cold and sepulchral as if it came from the other side of the grave. It chilled him. He supposed that his passion had carried him beyond the limits of propriety.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have spoken about it to-day. I'd no right to give you a shock. As a matter of fact I thought you'd be pleased. Remember, you're partly responsible. It's my enormous respect for you that assures me she's been well brought-up. And it seemed a good opportunity for me to speak of it: I mean the fact that the doctor had left her out of his will. You see, you needn't worry about money matters as far as she's concerned. I thought it might relieve your mind."

She did not answer. Her silence forced him to continue in his own defence.

"Of course you needn't suppose that I'm in any inordinate hurry. I don't want to dislocate your life again. Even if I have to wait a year or two—say till she's twenty-one—there's plenty of time to spare. I'm not going to steal her from you, Cathie, don't think that. I wanted—well, I suppose I wanted to tell you as the nearest person to her and an old friend. I wanted the encouragement of your good wishes. Now tell me, if you like, that I'm a romantic fool. What do you think of it?"

He faced her with such commanding confidence that her task

was harder. With another effort she mastered her whirling brain.

"I think Clare's very lucky," she heard herself saying.

The compliment dazzled him so that he could not see what struggle lay behind it. "So you'll give me your blessing?" he said. "For the present we'll leave it at that. All I can ask you to do is to hold a sort of watching brief on my behalf. I can't tell you what a relief it is to feel that you're behind me."

Aunt Cathie rose mechanically to her feet in obedience to a blind instinct that compelled her to escape. She knew that he expected her to speak, and speech was impossible. When Wilburn saw her rise he interpreted her movement as a signal of dismissal. No doubt she was too exhausted and overwrought to deal with a stranger's presence any longer. He supposed that he was partly to blame. As she came toward him on her way to the door with the automatic concentration of a somnambulist, he was overwhelmed with pity and respect for her devotion, with amazement at the age and weariness that showed themselves in her face. He was impelled to take her arm as she passed and hold her for a moment.

"Good-bye," he said. "Don't think of seeing me off. I'll look after myself. I think you're the bravest woman I've ever

known."

He bent and kissed her forehead. Then he opened the door and she passed out.

7

LOVE AND DEATH

BLOW after blow. Out of the wreckage of her shattered world Aunt Cathie's misery drove her aimlessly. There was

no refuge for her. That house, which had sheltered her whole life, was empty and haunted. Outside, the rain beat down as if it would never cease. Within the room from which she had fled, Wilburn cleared his throat. She heard a rustle of stiff paper. No doubt he was reconsidering the details of the doctor's will in the interval before the carriage came for him. Then, once again, the hall was possessed by an unusual silence. She could not account for it until she realized, of a sudden, that the grandfather clock had stopped ticking. For the first time in all her life. She stood and peered up into its blank face. It was too dark to read the letters engraved on it. She knew them by heart. Arthur Tumstall, Kidderminster. 1824. This was death indeed.

Ten minutes later, stretched on her bed, cold and inanimate, she heard the wheels of the victoria squelching on the sodden drive, and the voice of Thirza Rudge cooing appropriate good-byes to Wilburn in the hall. Then silence again; or only the sound of rain.

At last she could stand this loneliness no longer. It frightened her. She dared not relax lest something new and monstrous should take her unawares. Aimlessly, for all she knew, she rose from her bed and passed along the landing to the door of Clare's room. Why she should have gone to Clare she could not imagine. It would have been wiser to avoid her. It was Clare whose reincarnation of Sylvia's beauty had dealt her this last, most stunning blow. She denied it; Clare was not responsible; rather those supernal powers, which the doctor had always taught her to despise and discredit, had made a cynical adjustment in the balance of their account.

Before such mysterious dispensations it was useless to struggle or protest. By fighting against them she could assure her own defeat. Her only hope of salvation lay not in passive surrender, but in an eager acceptance of her loss. To save her life she must lose it; to restore her dignity she must court extreme humiliation. This paradox offered a mystical solution of her difficulty, and yet it had a primitive logic of its own which satisfied her reason. She was not the first pagan who has found comfort in the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice. Armed and elevated by its assumption, she entered Clare's room, determined not only to confess her fault, but also to discharge faithfully the hateful embassy with which Wilburn had entrusted her.

Yet when she found herself in Clare's presence, she was as incapable of speech as she had been with Wilburn. Clare had discarded the black frock with sombre trimmings of crape which she had worn at Stourton. She had put on another, her best, without a hint of mourning in it and stood with her back to the door by which Aunt Cathie had entered, looking through the window over the wet orchard, thinking of Ralph, and wondering if he were on his way.

Aunt Cathie drifted into the dark room like a ghost. Like a ghost suspended in some eddy of air, she halted midway. But Clare neither heard nor saw her; for her heart was full of sweet, warm tremors and flutterings of expectation.

"It's like a dream," Aunt Cathie thought. "She doesn't even

heed me." She compelled her ghostly lips to speak:

"Clare . . ."

The child gave a start and turned to meet her with a quick eagerness.

"Aunt Cathie, dearest, how you startled me! I never heard

you come."

Aunt Cathie's lips spoke again. "The clock in the hall . . . it's stopped," they said, "and there's no one who understands how to wind it." It wasn't a bit what she wanted to say.

"I'm sure Mr. Wilburn could show us, dearest," said Clare.

LOVE IS ENOUGH

"No, no, he's gone. He went half an hour ago."

Wasn't it significant that Clare should straightway mention his name? A reminder? They needn't be afraid. She was going through with it. Only give her time!

"He went half an hour ago," she repeated. It seemed that her strength was returning. "I want to talk to you about him, Clare. You know the doctor always trusted him? And through these awful days . . . well, really, I don't know what we should have done without him. We owe him a great debt of gratitude, Clare. He's such a strong, upright man. I don't think I've ever known anyone so sane, so dependable, so good."

She broke off suddenly in the midst of her eulogy. She had to speak as she was driven: "Clare, there's been a dreadful mistake about the will, my darling, and I'm to blame for it. You must forgive me. Clare. No . . . don't let's talk of that. He says that it can be put right. I want to talk to you about him. He admired your mother, you know. Years and years ago. You do like him, don't you, Clare?"

"Of course I like him, Aunt Cathie, We've always been good friends." The sudden change of direction bewildered her.

"Good friends . . . of course." Aunt Cathie drove herself steadily onward. "He's always treated you as a little girl, hasn't he? But that's all over, Clare. You aren't a little girl any longer. You're a woman. I want you to think of him as if you were a woman, darling. I want you to think most seriously. . . . What's that?"

She started. A bell had jangled in the passage below. Its sound broke the spell of puzzled wonder in which Clare had been listening. She knew what it meant.

"It's the front-door bell," she said.

"I wonder who it can be. Ellen will answer it."

"I'll go myself, dearest. I'd rather Ellen didn't. I must."

She hurried to the door, her face was all aflame.

"Clare! Don't be foolish! Listen. . . ."

"I can't, Aunt Cathie. I know who it is. It's Ralph."

"Ralph? Who do you mean?"

"Ralph Hingston. He wrote last night to say that he would come this evening."

"Clare . . . I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. Oh, dearest, I'm so happy. I know it's wrong. I wish you could be happy with me." She hugged Aunt Cathie suddenly to her breast. "Dearest," she whispered, "Ralph loves me, and I love him. And it's so wonderful. Oh, don't be angry with me!"

The bell gave another impatient jangle. She was gone.

8

HER LADYSHIP

LADY HINGSTON sat before a lacquer writing-table in the high window of her boudoir. When first the family had moved to Stourford they had called it "the boudoir" in joke, for their sudden translation out of the smoke of Wolverbury into these stucco battlements had made them all a little self-conscious; but now the name had been adopted as a serious and habitual description of her private room by servants and family alike. Boudoirs were fashionable. Even the unpretentious Mrs. Willis had one at Mawne Hall. It was part of the new nomenclature, comparable to the "music-room," where Ralph and Vivien practised Badminton, and the "library," where Sir Joseph stored his cedar-wood cabinets of cigars.

It was a pleasant room, facing the hills and the south-east.

Even on this autumnal morning, when the wind drove before it a drooping, tattered sky and ploughed through the sere beechwoods with a roar like that of the sea, it was warm and grateful to the senses. On the wide sweep of the drive, forty feet below her, gardeners, with big besoms, were sweeping the dead leaves into heaps that the wind, of sheer malice, whisked about their ears; and all the time a drift of other fugitives, hurrying perpetually westward like migrant hordes, escaped them, travelling over the gritty surface with a soft, sibilant whisper.

Lady Hingston watched them idly. Within the double windows she could not hear the roaring of the wood nor the whisper of dead leaves. Wrapped in her ermine dressing-jacket she contemplated the boisterous commotion as from another world. She dipped her pen in the silver inkstand meditatively. She frowned, and began to write in the large rounded hand that the amplitude of the note-paper suggested.

My dear Miss Weir,

I have been meaning to write to you for several days to say how deeply we all of us sympathize with you in your great loss. Although it is some years since we have seen anything of your dear father, we cannot help realizing what a noble and striking figure has passed away from us.

"Passed away from us," her mind repeated. There was a certain consoling richness in the phrase which use had consecrated to save people the personal expression of emotion too real, or too unreal, to be written without discomfort. "Passed away from us . . ."

"Mother, dear."

Behind her, in the doorway, stood Vivien. Lady Hingston looked round with a smile that inadequately disguised her irritation.

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"Yes, darling?"

"I'm so sorry to disturb you. I promised Ralph that I'd remind you to write that letter."

"That's just what I'm doing. I shall have finished in a few minutes,"

"Passed away from us . . ."

Naturally, she continued, we all feel it all the more at a moment when our two families—

"Naturally" was all very well. As a matter of fact it made no difference to their feelings. However . . .

—are going to be so intimately connected. We are all of us very fond of Clare. She is a sweet child; so unaffected and well brought-up. We know that she must have been a great comfort to you in your great sorrow . . .

With evident satisfaction she underlined the last three words.

You must pardon my boy if he is a little impatient. Though I know it seems cruel to steal Clare from you at a period like this, I am wondering if you could spare her to stay with us for a short time. The young people have so many important things to discuss! Supposing we send over for her to-morrow (Saturday) afternoon?

That was the important part of the letter, tactfully accomplished. Her pen leaped forward to the triumph of a generous ending:

Of course, if you would care to come over with her and have tea with us, we should all be too delighted to see you. But, perhaps, you'd rather not?

Believe me,
Yours most sincerely,
Margaret Hingston.

She sighed and laid down her pen. Vivien, who had been hovering over her like a kestrel, descended with a swoop.

"Had it better go into the bag, mother, or shall we send it over?"

"I think the post is better. It looks rather peremptory to send it by hand."

"But it is peremptory really," said the candid Vivien. "We must get Clare somehow out of that awful house. Ralph says it's too dreadful. Yesterday morning they had the mattresses out to air on the drive. His mattresses, you know. As for Miss Weir, she's like a funeral."

"Miss Weir's an unhappy, lonely woman, Vivien. You should be sorry for her."

"I am, dearest. But Clare's so young, and it's such a shame. Mother, I don't believe you realize what a darling Clare is."

Lady Hingston smiled. In a swift, half-mocking glance her eyes appraised and accepted the young, frank eagerness of Vivien's face. A wave of maternal pride warmed her heart. She answered quickly:

"It's not for the want of your telling me, anyway. I believe you're more in love with her than Ralph is. I've never known you quite so enthusiastic about a man."

"Oh, mother, how like you to say that!" Vivien flamed. "But even you can't deny that she's lovely."

"Yes. No. I'll admit she's a nice little thing. And she's a lady. Of course she's very young. I'd always imagined. . . . But that's beside the point. Your father and I are far too up-to-date to make any objection to our children's fancies. Ralph's in love with her, and I suppose he knows his own mind."

"He always does, mother. We all of us do. That's your fault, and dad's."

"You needn't throw it in my face. Still, I'm getting over

it by degrees. I hope you haven't any more shocks up your sleeve for me just yet, Vivien."

"Me?" Vivien laughed outright. "My dear mother, don't worry your head about me! I'm perfectly contented as I am, thank you. May I have the letter? I promised Ralph I'd be responsible for it."

Lady Hingston surrendered the document; then repented.

"No, wait one moment," she said. "I'd better address it myself. It looks more courteous. What do they call the place? Pen House, isn't it? And now I suppose I shall have to make myself presentable."

She rang the bell for Marguerite, her maid. Vivien, her purpose accomplished, bent over and kissed her hurriedly. It was pleasant to feel the firm, soft coolness of her daughter's cheek. As she gathered her dressing jacket about her, Lady Hingston shrugged herself inside it like a cat that has been stroked and is on the verge of purring; and rather like some small and glossy animal she looked, nestling in the snowy pelt with her clear skin and her eyes so darkly shining under the powdery whiteness of her hair. That hair and the brilliance of those black eyes gave her an air of sharp, concentrated clarity, which she was always at pains to augment by dressing in white and black, wearing no jewels but a string of pearls, her wedding ring, and a single diamond whose white rays matched the crystalline brilliance of her eyes. Her hair had been white for many years; thanks to her pride in it and the devotion of Marguerite its unchanging whiteness above her delicate cheeks gave to her rareness the permanence of a piece of porcelain, an air of perpetual youth, which, reinforced by the activity of her swift and passionate intelligence, were invariably fatal to men of middle age, to men, in short, of the generation most useful to her ambitions.

The consciousness of this power, so sedulously nursed, had made her the terror of the neighbourhood, particularly of the women of her own station. Even her generosity, which was lavish and unbounded, had become suspect. You never knew where you were with her, people said; the point at which the flame of her scathing intelligence might leap out and sear; the moment when her kindliness might give place to an insolence, unpremeditated, but none the less intolerable. By the imminence of this terror she ruled her household, hovering over them like a hawk above a pen of chickens. With her children she was usually complacent, recognizing, perhaps, beneath their various exteriors, and particularly in the case of Vivien, some germ of her own ardent nature.

To her husband, the principal victim, as people supposed, of her humours, her attitude was curiously complicated. There was no doubt that she had put him through the mill; Marguerite and Parker, the butler, could testify to that; and yet this solemn, pasty little man, with his pouched and neutral eyes, was the only creature on earth whom she respected. He was her masterpiece. The baronetcy, the splendour and ease of Stourford, the vast impressiveness of the works at Wolverbury, all these she had created; and, now that they were firmly established, her whole life was consumed in care and respect for her creation and for him, its inadequate symbol. In private she still bullied him; on occasions she still bullied him in public; but the pursuit of her cult had crystallized into a conviction that, in the end, her creation could do no wrong, so that, in later years, she had found herself deferring, quite astonishingly, to his judgment.

Sir Joseph, whose cunning had developed beneath her tutelage, was quick to recognize his advantage. On a different plane he was as intelligent as his wife. By nice experience he knew the

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exact point at which he might assert himself. He had done so in the moment of exhaustion that followed the tempest aroused by the announcement of Ralph's engagement to Clare. He liked Ralph. The boy's placid nature was nearer to his own than those of George or Vivien; and when once he had carried his point, like a savage who imagines that he can extract virtue from the skin of a monster that he has killed, he had wrapped himself in the spoils of his triumph and flaunted them before the whole household, insisting not only on Clare's recognition, but on her invitation to Stourford.

The principal sufferer from the struggle was Marguerite. A big-boned, middle-aged Italian-Swiss, with a high-coloured complexion, creaking corsets and large, insensitive brown eyes, she had submitted for five years to the embarrassments of the Anglo-French dialect which Lady Hingston, in her more tranquil moods, had invented as a means of communication between them. By perseverance she had mastered the grammar and pronunciation of this original tongue so that, when she wasn't flurried, she could speak it with reasonable fluency; but when Lady Hingston lost her temper Marguerite lost her head, and relapsed pitifully into French as it is spoken in Lugano. "Don't gabble like that! Comment est-ce-que vous osez parler avec cet accent abominable?" her mistress would cry. And Marguerite, abashed by the inadequacy of her native tongue and too frightened to recollect the syntax of that which Lady Hingston had invented, would clutch feebly at the language that she spoke in the servant's hall, muttering: "Pardon, my lady, I have not understand." With the result that the bulk of their conversations were bilingual: the commands of Lady Hingston being issued in execrable French and Marguerite's replies in equally execrable English. Since the news of Ralph's engagement the bilingual phase had lasted for four days; and although Lady

Hingston was "getting over it by degrees," Marguerite feared from a certain birdlike fierceness in her glance that there was more to come.

"Bon jour, Marguerite," she sniffed, without looking at her. "Good morning, my lady." The worst was to be feared. Marguerite went red in preparation.

"Je suis beaucoup en retard ce matin. Je dois m'habiller tout-de-suite. This petticoat is trop longue. Je le connais bien. Portez des epingles! A l'instant! Are you asleep?"

"Non, madame. . . . No, my lady. . . ."

Creaking like a hamper Marguerite dropped to her knees, her wide mouth, like a Chinese monster's, bristling with pins. "C'est ici," said Lady Hingston. "Plus qu'un inch. On the left. Mon dieu! Etes vous folle? J'ai dit left, pas right!"

Marguerite swayed from one knee to the other, painfully straddled, sticking pins with a devoted desperation into the petticoat's hem that swirled in her eyes as Lady Hingston wriggled with impatience. Then suddenly, as if she had forgotten all about her, her mistress darted to the writing-table and closed the lid of the inkpot. Marguerite followed ludicrously on her knees, shedding pins as she went.

"One moment, my lady," she gasped.

"Quoi?" said Lady Hingston. "Ca ne fait rien. Trouvez moi un autre. Le vert. Et rammassez les epingles, Marguerite! Vous êtes sourde?"

"Yes, madame. . . . No, my lady. . . ."

"Ecoutez. La fiancée de Monsieur Ralph vient ici aujourd'hui. Il faut que vous êtes sa maid, n'est-ce-pas? Comprenez? Elle est une fille de bonne famille, mais d'un type un peu bourgeois. Kindly keep that to yourself. No gossip in the kitchen. Eh bien, peut-être elle n'a pas des confections convenables. Voyez si ce n'est pas quelque chose de

noir dans les tiroirs de Mademoiselle Vivien, n'est-ce-pas? "Yes, my lady," spluttered Marguerite, her mouth full of the scattered pins. She creaked on to her feet again. "But the petticoat: I shorten?"

Lady Hingston tossed her head. Already she had stepped out of the pin-puckered garment. She darted towards the door of her dressing-room, a slight but militant figure in her ermine jacket. She turned.

"Le vert. N'ai-je-pas dit? Où est votre tête? Remember, je vous confie pour la faire presentable. Allez, allez!"

She closed the door in the face of the disconcerted Marguerite. Marguerite, with tears in her big eyes, stood staring at the door like a cow, making piteous movements up and down with her joined hands.

9

STOURFORD

SO Clare came to Stourford. Alone: for behind the gracious phrases of Lady Hingston's letter Aunt Cathie was quick to perceive that she wasn't wanted. The doctor had never liked the Hingstons, she told herself, and that was enough for her; her conduct had so long conformed to the standard of the old man's prejudices that even now they continued to direct her.

"They might have realized," she complained, "that I am still in deep mourning. It's quite out of the question that I should go gadding out to tea-parties. Particularly to strangers," she added.

She insisted, however, that Clare should be driven over by Jabez in the victoria.

"It isn't as if we hadn't a carriage of our own," she said. "As a matter of fact, we were carriage-folk long before the Hingstons. I do hope, Clare darling, you won't allow yourself to be patronized."

"They're not a bit like that, Aunt Cathie," Clare told her. Aunt Cathie shook her head: "Of course I don't presume to interfere in your affairs. You're old enough to look after yourself; but Lady Hingston has the reputation of being a very difficult woman. You must be careful to hold your own."

She busied herself with the preparation of Clare's ward-robe as though she were arming her for a battle. An inadequate armament, she was bound to confess. "Still, you're in mourning," she repeated with a macabre satisfaction, "and they'll have sense enough, I hope, to realize it. That excuses everything. Besides, black is always good and ladylike."

As they stood on the doorstep waiting for Jabez to stagger out with the luggage the postman arrived with the afternoon letters. Aunt Cathie possessed herself of them greedily. One was addressed to Clare in Wilburn's formal hand. Aunt Cathie's eyes followed it so eagerly that Clare was forced to let her see its contents. They were brief, and to the point: My dear Clare.

Your aunt has written to me, announcing the news of your engagement. I hasten to send you my congratulations, and every good wish for your future happiness.

Believe me,

Always yours sincerely,

Dudley Wilburn.

It was not an exciting letter; but Clare's mind was so flushed with the prospect of her adventure that everything

seemed new and roseate. "It was sweet of him to write so quickly, wasn't it?" she said, with dancing eyes. "He is a dear!"

"Yes," said Aunt Cathie. "Here is another for you."

The writing was that of Mr. Darnay. Clare took it hurriedly and put it in her pocket. But Aunt Cathie's eyes were no longer curious; she was staring at the half-sheet of Wilburn's letter, reading into its stiff phrases the force of a concealed emotion. For the moment her self-interest had vanished; she was suffering with Wilburn, admiring the fortitude, the graciousness with which he had taken his blow, remembering the frank honesty of his confession, protesting, with all her soul, against the criminal lightness of this chit of a girl who could throw herself into the arms of a boy like Ralph Hingston when she might have had this paragon of sobriety and strength. If only I had been younger, she thought, I could have shown him what true devotion means!

"All ready, Miss," old Jabez panted. "Jump in, Miss Clare."

The little victoria creaked as she stepped into it; the brakehandle grated on its ratchet; they move off slowly, the old horse whisking its tail, and Clare sitting bolt upright in her black silk frock and the hat which she had worn at the funeral.

They had almost reached Stourford before she realized how formidable this adventure was. As they passed beneath the unfinished freestone gateway her heart began to founder. The victoria, old Jabez and herself seemed curiously shabby and out of date, reduced to insignificance by the lavish expanses of park through which the drive wound upward. The boisterous wind, sweeping over open ground, had blown her hat awry. She wished that she had not submitted to Aunt Cathie in the choice of clothes. Her black frock made her feel like

a new housemaid driving up from the station in a fly with her tin box behind, and all the stucco battlements of Stourford regarded her with contempt. But as they pulled up at the foot of the steps Vivien came flying down to meet her, Vivien, with her dark hair streaming and all the kindness of her soul in her ardent face.

"Clare, darling," she gasped, "I've been watching the drive for hours. How sweet and demure you look in that black foulard! No, never mind about your luggage; the footman will see to that. Come along in at once. Ralph's over at Wolverbury doing his duty, so I shall have you all to myself. And tea's ready. Mother's waiting in the hall."

If only Lady Hingston had not been waiting it would have been easier. There she stood, small, but incredibly potent, in black satin and an osprey toque pinned with a flying arrow of diamonds. Her skin was so pink and clear beneath her silvery hair, her nose so delicately curved, her lips so red, that Clare was dazzled. I shall never be able to look like that, she thought, as long as I live.

With a curious mixture of graciousness and frigidity she took Clare in her arms and kissed her. In the contact of this clear, cool skin of Lady Hingston's cheek she was conscious of a delicate, faint perfume of amber which seemed to her the physical emanation of the elder woman's refinement.

They sat down to tea at a folding table fitted with a silver tray. The cups were Worcester, thin lipped, with scrolled gilt handles—Lady Hingston, as a member of the new aristocracy, believed in patronizing the county's industries—but the tea inside them was thin and tasteless: very different from that of Thirza, who liked some body in hers. As Clare sipped it those clear black eyes were on her. She felt that she was

gulping like a child at a school treat. Her appetite deserted her. She could not help despairing at the delicate relish with which the pretty, brilliant teeth of Lady Hingston devoured the curls of bread and butter as if they were her natural food. She sat amazed before such virtuosity.

"I hope you will be comfortable, Clare," Lady Hingston said at last. "Vivien will show you your room, won't you, darling? And my maid, Marguerite, will look after you. You'll find her very clever. Of course you do speak French?"

"A little," Clare confessed. She had a vision of the classroom at St. Monica's, herself mumbling a paragraph of Erckmann-Chatrian.

"She'll understand you better if you do," Lady Hingston's voice was melodiously persuasive, each syllable slipped through her lips complete, as though those pretty teeth had applied themselves to its perfection. She rose and touched Clare's shoulder in a little, friendly gesture. Then she held her at arm's length and looked into her face with an amused and quizzical air. Clare felt herself going shy and red beneath this scrutiny. She smiled nervously with trembling lips, and as she did so Lady Hingston smiled too, in a sudden comprehension of the child's youth and innocence. "I want to see what you are like," she said. "Yes . . ." On the long-drawn sibilant she stopped. Then she took Clare's face in her two hands and kissed her. "I hope you'll be happy, my child," she said.

"I do love him so," Clare whispered.

Lady Hingston gave a little laugh. "I have such a heap of letters to write," she said. In any embarrassment her correspondence always overwhelmed her. "This Primrose League will be the death of me. Now, Vivien, don't for goodness' sake forget that dinner's early this evening: half-past seven. And see that Clare has everything she wants. Run along, children!"
And Clare still smiled; her heart was bursting with gratitude for the other's generosity.

"She's so pretty," she said, as they ascended to Vivien's bedroom.

"Who's pretty?" Vivien asked.

"Your mother. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, mother's all right," said Vivien carelessly. "Of course, you know, we're all a little mad; all except George. But then, we're really rather nice with it. Mother's a chameleon. One day she looks about twenty-five, and the next she's ninety. It just depends how the fancy takes her, how she wants to look. It's funny, you know; she puzzles everyone except me. I know her inside out. There's one thing certain, and that is that she likes you. I don't think she particularly wanted to; but she does. Of course she couldn't help it."

"Vivien, you make me shy when you talk like that."

"Well, you are rather nice, you know. Several people have noticed it. Including Ralph."

They sat on the bed talking. The relation was new to Clare, but curiously happy and reassuring. There was an air of bright spaciousness in this room of Vivien's that seemed strange to her after the low-ceilinged bedrooms at Pen House with their icy-shadowed lattices and ponderous furniture. Here everything was clean and shining as a new needle; from the gay print curtains to the polished floor the room was full of air and light; a faint, hygienic scent of beeswax pervaded it. It was not beautiful, and yet its lack of beauty was atoned for by its freshness, its clarity, its freedom. Like Vivien herself, Clare decided; for when you examined her in detail Vivien was not beautiful, though her features, like those of the room, suggested a happiness unhampered by memories of

the past, serenely confident of the future, a pleasant, uncomplicated tenor of life, so completely detached from care that in it one could be contented with the mere joy of being alive.

They talked for a long while about this life at Stourford, so different from anything that Clare had known before, so free from the domestic preoccupations that enveloped Aunt Cathie's, so innocent of meditation or the subtle pains of art, so clean, so empty. Talking of it and inhaling its atmosphere, Clare felt as if she had been transported into a high, rarefied air, sparkling as wine, but a little intoxicating. It was difficult to reconcile her black silk frock and the crape on her hat, those sombre reminders of Pen House, with this stimulating altitude. She felt happy, and yet a trifle giddy and unreal.

A knock at the door. In answer to Vivien's cheery "Come in!" Marguerite entered. Her keys! Immediately Clare's rapture faded. She saw her poor little trunk exposed in pitiless light, contemptuously rifled by the hands of this tall foreigner. Vivien would not allow her to escape exposure. The keys were produced and surrendered. Clare felt like a convict entering a jail, like a vanquished defender delivering the keys of a fortress into enemy hands.

Later, in her own room, a sumptuous, bow-windowed chamber of blue and gold, with a four-poster sheltered by the wings of golden eagles, she found that she had no need to dread the discreet Marguerite. Her baggage had disappeared; its lamentable contents had been disposed in drawers of modern Chippendale that smelt of lavender. Her bath stood waiting for her, its temperature precisely regulated; and when she returned from it, glowing and exhilarated, she saw her white party-frock from St. Monica's laid reverently on the brocaded counterpane. How easy a life, she thought, in which one didn't have to think what one should wear!

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Marguerite creaked into the room in tight-fitting bodice of black sateen and a lawn apron.

"Your hair, Ma'm'selle? Perhaps you speak French?"

A little. Marguerite sighed in relief; for Clare's school-girl French was simplicity itself compared with the dialect invented by Lady Hingston. Marguerite let herself go. As Clare sat before the gilt mirror with closed eyes, hypnotized by the swishing of the brush and the light touch of the maid's skilful hands, she found herself listening to a spate of rapid speech on whose surface she clutched at floating straws of intelligibility.

She had lovely hair—mais ravissants!—and so much of it. What a pity that she should dress it with such unbecoming simplicity. Simplicity was one thing. A natural wave. Let her wait and she should see. Like this! Marguerite's fingers flickered and darted like spindles, twining the dark strands into whorls and spools and curled shells. The hairpins grazed her scalp so lightly that she ceased to dread their thrusting. How fortunate a young lady! M. Ralph was the best of the whole family: so calm, so handsome, so veritably English. They were all kind, the family Ingson. Ladyship was a little nervous sometimes; she made her lose her head till it was empty as a balloon. But then, so generous! One could not have all the qualities. Mr. Parker too. A brave man, with dignity, and respectful. So different from the people in the village. The young men in Stourford, knowing she was a foreigner, took it for granted that she was a person of loose morals. She, a married woman, or at least a widow, with a daughter of seventeen! Her husband had been an Italian, one of the first chefs in Lugano. He had died of poumonite, suddenly. A fine man: more than ninety-five kilos. A hot kitchen, and cold winds from the Alps. His relatives were farmers on Lac

Majeur: her daughter was still with them. "And I am here," she ended. "Regardez, Mademoiselle! Enfin!" Marguerite stepped backward with clasped hands and surveyed her art in triumph. Now the white dress. A little out of fashion: the neck too high, the sleeves not full enough; but when one had youth these things were nothing. A little string of pearls-not big ones, like the ladyship's-tout, tout petites? No? But, perhaps, it was better. A young lady had no need of jewels: the eyes, the lips, the teeth! Like that. . . .

Her dark eves widened with an admiration as naïve as if, in Clare's adornment, she had achieved a vicarious sensation of youth: a youth innocent of black sateen and white lawn aprons, in which the young girls, with combs in their dark hair, strolled arm-in-arm along the quays under the shadows of plane-trees, glancing sideways at youths in their Sunday clothes, seeing the placid shapes of wooded mountains, and the reflections of cypresses that pierced the still lake-water like the points of spears. She turned to go, half reluctantly. My lady would be wanting her. Would Mademoiselle wait here till Miss Vivien came to fetch her? Miss Vivien had sent that message.

Clare was alone, rapt in the contemplation of her transformed self. A knock startled her, as though her vanity had been discovered. She hurried to the door,

"Good evening." It was Ralph's voice, soft and modulated by respect for the modesty of her bedroom. "How are you?" he said. "Everything all right? I suppose I can't see vou?"

She didn't really know, but before she could answer he had continued:

"Open the door a little bit and put your hand through. No, not that hand, you silly child, the other one!"

LOVE IS ENOUGH 🖘

Standing behind the door she felt his fingers close on her wrist, his warm lips kissing her palm. Then something cold encircled her third finger.

"Look at it," he said, "and see if it's all right. I got it this afternoon in North Bromwich. That's why I'm late."

She withdrew her hand. She saw a gold circlet set with a single diamond whose facets flashed blue and green and orange and blood-red.

"Oh, Ralph, it's lovely," she whispered back. "You darling!"
He laughed softly. "Clear-white," he said. "Can't I see
more of you?"

She opened the door. To the danger of Marguerite's coiffure he took her and crushed her in his arms.

"My love, my love," he whispered.

10

DINNER AT STOURFORD

IT was unfortunate that her first evening had coincided with a dinner-party. Sir Joseph always entertained on Saturdays, when the week's work at Wolverbury was over, usually as an excuse for carrying his business with him to Stourford. That evening he had invited one of his directors, Lord Arthur Powys, whom he always called his "bow-ideal" of an aristocrat, to spend the week-end with him and meet the guiding genius of the Sedgebury Main Colliery, that Mr. Furnival of whom Clare had heard so much from Wilburn at Pen House.

At dinner she had sat between them. She liked Lord Arthur, a long-legged, rather shabby creature with a silky, straw-

coloured beard, through which he mumbled as though he were always talking to himself, and kind, blue, meditative eyes; but Furnival she hated. There was too much of the animal in his turbulent, fiery hair, his unkempt beard, his greedy mouth and eyes. For one moment those eyes had swept her with a devouring intensity that made her skin burn. His glance was like the breath of an unopened furnace. It was as if it had appraised and rejected her. When it had passed she felt that she no longer existed, except for one embarrassing moment, when she had felt against her thigh the warm, disquieting pressure of his knee and had withdrawn herself into a constricted space. After the soup Furnival had talked across her, projecting his vivid personality into the dull eyes of Sir Joseph, or Lord Arthur's languid body, so that she felt herself feeble, isolated, out of place, and appallingly remote from Ralph.

At the other end of the table Lady Hingston, in white satin, gleamed and flashed her plumage like a bird of paradise. On her right hand Mr. Pomfret, in a silk waistcoat, followed the giddy gyrations of her flight. Next to Sir Joseph rose the bare and bony shoulders of the Vicar's wife. She sat there with a fixed smile of satisfaction in her surroundings, pretending to listen to her neighbour, George Hingston, a tall, spare, sallow version of his father, but actually straining her ears to catch the enormities that Lady Hingston's lips were launching at the Vicar. She hated Lady Hingston with a deep and bitter grudging. They were excellent friends. But that evening she had set out with the intention of seeing that the Vicar was not bullied.

Dead opposite to Clare sat her future sister-in-law, Eleanor, George's wife, a matt and rather lifeless beauty, with magnificent diamonds and a compressed, unhappy smile. Ralph had

habitually spoken rather scornfully of Eleanor; Vivien had never mentioned her name; and this made Clare anxious to see what she was like. It was difficult; for whenever she stole a quiet glance in her direction, Eleanor was regarding her fixedly with her dead, grey, beautiful eyes, Once only Clare caught them glancing at her husband; and then she was aware of an enormous spiritual separation. There was a barrier more absolute than Vivien's body between Eleanor and George. The stony serenity of Eleanor's unhappiness chilled Clare's heart. She thought: "This woman, far more refined and beautiful than me, has married Ralph's brother, and see how unhappy she is! Supposing . . ." But even as the idea disquieted her she caught Ralph's eye; he smiled and secretly lifted his glass, and all her confidence returned. He was so different from George, so different from all of them. It only troubled her to know that Eleanor's cold eyes had intercepted the gay confidence that passed between them.

By this time the circulation of Clicquot had stimulated Sir Joseph's end of the table to a loud discussion on the finances of Willis, Hackett and Willis, the great steelworks at Mawne. Suddenly the penetrating voice of Mrs. Pomfret rang above it like a clarion. Her quick ears, pendulous beneath her crow's nest of grey hair, had caught the echo of her hostess's last phrase.

"And what has the poor church done now, Lady Hingston?" A sudden silence fell on the whole table. Beneath it could be heard the sombre voice of Parker attaining the discretion that Marguerite admired: "Ice-pudding or meringue, madam? . . . Meringue or ice-pudding, sir?" Lady Hingston smiled wickedly, her head thrown back like a white peacock's when it spreads its tail. She did not answer. Sir Joseph blinked; Lord Arthur thrust out a bony hand for salted almonds; only Mr.

Furnival smiled with the satisfaction of a collier at a dog-fight.

"And, pray, what has the poor church done now?" the militant voice of Mrs. Pomfret repeated. Her husband gave a beseeching smile at Lady Hingston. "Meringue or ice-pudding, sir?" Parker murmured confidentially. Lady Hingston, like an actress waiting for her cue, allowed time for Parker to finish his question, and the Vicar to mask his confusion by a slice of pudding. Her voice was innocent and persuasive.

"It's what the poor church hasn't done, Mrs. Pomfret," she said.

Furnival's lips twitched upward in a shrill cackle of laughter. Lord Arthur leant forward and smiled behind his beard. The Vicar's face was contorted with the cold of an immoderate mouthful of ice, and Mrs. Pomfret, red to the ears, relapsed into Sir Joseph's tactful protection.

"Ice-pudding or meringue, Miss?" said Parker, solemnly.

A moment later, sparkling with triumph and generosity, Lady Hingston rose and shepherded her opponent to the drawing-room. Clare followed them, at Vivien's side, but soon dutifully deserted her for Mrs. Furnival, a tiny woman in a shapeless Liberty djibbeh, who had spoken in monosyllables throughout the evening. Clare found herself alone in a corner with Mrs. George, who continued to examine her critically with her lovely cold grey eyes. Her shoulders were white and smoothly moulded, with a faint silky lustre, like that of a soapstone carving, they seemed too perfect to be alive; her voice was low, her pronunciation delicate and precise; but when she was not speaking her lips relaxed, by habit, into a smile that suggested nothing but unhappiness. She spoke with a curiously distant manner of Clare's engagement.

"I hear you are going to live at Uffdown Manor," she said.

"Oh, it's hardly as definite as that," Clare told her, "Ralph had some wild idea . . ."

"I should keep him to it," said Eleanor. "George and I are forced to live at Wolverbury. The smoke is simply dreadful; it soils lace curtains in less than a week. George doesn't know the difference. He spends every moment of his day at the works. They might just as well rivet him in a bed of concrete like one of the rolling mills for all I see of him."

"But you have your children," Clare suggested.

"Yes."

"I've never seen them."

"No. You'll have to come over one day with Ralph. Is that your engagement ring?"

Clare held out her finger. All through dinner she had been stealing shy glances at it to see if it were really there. Eleanor surveyed it calmly. In the light of her own diamonds it looked a little insignificant.

"Yes," she said, with the first gleam of keenness in her magnificent eyes. "I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be happy. The family are a queer lot. Don't be put upon by George's mother, that's the great thing. You've seen how rude she can be. I had it out with her six years ago, and now we get on quite well. I mean we simply don't exist for each other. All she worries about is that I should look nice. I'm part of the window-dressing for Wolverbury. Admiralty inspectors and so on. We have to give them lunch."

"I think you're simply lovely," said Clare in a timid burst of admiration.

"Yes, I know," said Eleanor, lifelessly. "So are the children. And now I suppose I'm going to have another."

THE TIME OF ROSES

Clare blushed. The only thing she could think of saying was, "Are you?" and that seemed inadequate.

"Well, Ralph's the best of them," Eleanor added suddenly. "Here he comes. I suppose I shall have to surrender you."

She didn't look as if she minded. Clare watched her calm eyes following the movements of George. Ralph whispered in Clare's ear: "Let's get away out of this," and a moment later they were alone in the empty morning-room. Nobody seemed to notice their going. The wide, warm house was as impersonal as an hotel; it was only when they were alone that she could rid herself of the feeling that even its most intimate luxuries were designed for the entertainment of strangers, that Lady Hingston herself was rather a beautiful and efficient ornament than a real person, filling, at Stourford, the place which Eleanor was forced to occupy at Wolverbury. Ralph was real enough, thank heaven; so was Vivien, and so, indubitably, was Marguerite. But Mr. Parker . . .

It was nearly midnight when Ralph took her along the wide, soft-carpeted corridor to the bedroom door. Their goodnight kisses had a new and curious quality in these luxurious surroundings. It seemed to her that Marguerite's sophisticated fingers had changed more than the shape of her hair. Her whole personality was changed. And Ralph, too, seemed different in the sleekness of his evening-dress, his carefully-smoothed hair, his face, that looked more sanguine than ever above the high starched collar. Of course he was more handsome and she more elegant; and yet, in their unusual brilliance, something had been lost. As he kissed her she closed her eyes to shut out Sir Joseph's electric light and tried to wish herself backward into the atmosphere that she knew, of darkness and soft air and whispering leaves. It was useless. Haunted by a vague dissatisfaction she closed the door behind her.

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Nor could she sleep. Under the spread wings of those gilt eagles she lay and stared into the dark canopy. Since the day of her grandfather's death life had moved too swiftly for her. She wanted a breathing space in which to collect her thoughts. Hitherto her life had been compact of dreams and meditations. At Stourford there was no room for this quietest existence. By day and night the place was flooded with strong light that allowed no relaxation or privacy. It was like living in the midst of a moving crowd out of which, perpetually, as she lay awake, she could hear the butler's sepulchral voice demanding, "Ice-pudding or meringue, sir? Meringue or icepudding, madam?" With so many sounds and visions and shadows of strange personality racing through her mind, it was useless to think of sleep. It suddenly struck her that in her excitement she had forgotten to read her appointed text from The More Excellent Way. Miss Boldmere would not have forgotten. By now, no doubt, Miss Boldmere was asleep in that little room at St. Monica's, faintly scented with incense. How unsubstantial, how utterly remote Miss Boldmere seemed! Clare switched on her bedside lamp and read the passage listlessly. It had no meaning for her, and yet, by association, it reminded her of the letter from Mr. Darnay which she had left unopened. She took it from the drawer in which Marguerite had discreetly concealed it.

Bellevue Villas,

Wychbury, Worcs.

My dear daughter in X,

Since last I saw you your life has been very crowded and exciting. I was distressed for you when I heard of your dear grandfather's death, and, above all, for your poor aunt, on whom the blow must have fallen even more heavily. I have been thinking a great deal about your grandfather, for even though he was not by profession a Christian, and, therefore, cannot have passed to the next world in a

state of Grace, his works were full of the spirit of Christ, and we, of the Church Militant, may hope that we do rightly in invoking the intercessory prayers of the Blessed Saints on his behalf. I know that you are doing this daily. Remember that such invocations are always most effective during the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Then, as a still greater surprise, I hear from the Vicar the news of your engagement and approaching marriage to Mr. Hingston. It astonished me all the more because I do not remember your having mentioned his name to me at any time. Perhaps it has slipped my memory. You know, I feel sure, how deeply I feel for and with you in this solemn moment, and how ardently I pray for your true happiness. I think you have been thoroughly instructed in the attitude of the Church toward the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony and realize its solemnity. I hope you will not let the natural excitement of the occasion divert your mind from this aspect of the matter. At Stourford you will meet many strangers who will flatter you with the importance of your engagement. Remember that this is a season for humility and prayer rather than for elation. I think it would be a good thing for you to go into retreat for a few days. It would calm your thoughts, and give you a chance to meditate. It has alarmed me a little not to have seen you at Mass for nearly a week.

> Believe me, my dear daughter, Yours, in Christ,

> > Cyril Darnay.

Day of the Holy Guardian Angels, 1897.

This letter, kindly and gentle as it seemed, was full of veiled reproaches. Clare knew that she deserved them, every one. It was true that she had not mentioned Ralph's name to Mr. Darnay in her confessions; true that she had absented herself from St. Chad's; true that she had failed in her duty of pleading for intercession on the doctor's behalf; that she had not thought of her engagement in the terms that Mr. Darnay suggested. Lying there under the gilt canopy and staring at the dainty meticulous hand of Mr. Darnay's letter, she realized that she should have felt guilty and repentant.

Honestly she felt nothing of the kind: only very sleepy and rather irritated. It was not that she questioned Mr. Darnay's right to instruct and direct her, but that these directions and instructions seemed to come to her from a distance only less remote than that of Miss Boldmere's; they were unreal and fugitive, like the remembered perfume of stale incense. Her mind was so full of new experience, her life so crowded with urgent practical necessities and enthralling dreams, that there was no room in either for Miss Boldmere or Mr. Darnay. She did not reject religion as an integral part of her life; but she began to realize that it had previously engrossed her because her emotions had no other means of expression. On this new plane of existence it began to assume proportions more modest in relation to the rest of her life. "After all," she told herself, "I'm not going to become a nun."

She saw herself, in retrospect, as an inhuman little prig, and wondered at the forbearance with which Ralph, dear thing, had treated her. "To-morrow," she thought, "is Sunday. I'll get him to walk over with me to St. Chad's." To-morrow? It was Sunday already. She folded the letter under her pillow and switched off the light. As she fell asleep she was conscious not of the folded paper, but of the unaccustomed pressure of Ralph's ring upon her finger.

ΙI

BROADSIDES

FROM that night forward she found herself caught up in the machinery of Lady Hingston's unceasing activities. They gave her no respite. Only at night, when she lay down tired

on her canopied four-poster, or in those short, sweet evenings which she spent alone with Ralph, had she time to project her thoughts in any direction but that of the engrossing moment.

On the following Wednesday Ralph snatched an afternoon to make a second pilgrimage to Uffdown Manor. This time they rode over on the new bicycles, armed with keys and measuring tapes. Vivien accompanied them; and somehow the atmosphere of that enchanted house seemed subtly changed. It was not that the silvery façade of brick was less sedately lovely; over the tangled borders an October sky hung low and grey, impressing the suspended calm of autumn on the slow-winged fluttering of late Vanessae; peacocks and red admirals, which spread their eyes and bars of velvety gloom as listlessly as if they knew that the season of flight and gaiety was over. Greedily they sucked the fermented juices of fallen fruit whose skins the wasps had wounded with their powerful jaws. They were so drunk and sluggish that no human shadow could disturb them.

Within the house the air was warm and full of a faint flavour of old oak floors. The rooms were small, but beautifully proportioned, the walls made lovely in themselves by oblong panels with conventional Adam designs. The place was not nearly as big as Clare had imagined; but the skilful handling of its dimensions made each room seem gracious and calm and self-possessed, in vivid contrast to the pretentious restlessness of Stourford.

While Ralph and Vivien laughed and grew hot in the tangles of their tapes, Clare wandered away from them into a private dream in which she found herself imagining the life that she would live there, so different in every way from the repression of Pen House and Stourford's glaring publicity. She began to feel that it was already her own. Here, where

the tall windows faced westward, she would make her musicroom. A black Bechstein, over whose shining cover, innocent
of the ornaments which infested Aunt Cathie's silk-pleated
Broadwood, she could gaze outward, downward, past the
rounded heads of elm trees, into the rosy air that bathed the
unseen plain. There she would sit, at sunset in springtime,
waiting for Ralph to come home from Wolverbury, playing
all old and formal music, the stately movement of minuet
and sarabande and pavane, and her playing would carry her
back into the century when that gracious room was planned,
so that the kindly spirits of those who had built it would wake
and smile on her.

"Why, there you are!" the voice of Vivien exclaimed. "Poor old Ralph's been scouring the whole house in search of you. Ralph, Ralph, darling, I've found her!" she cried. "No, honestly, Clare, I call that shirking. Look here. We've got the measurements of nearly everything except this. Catch hold of the end of the tape, my child, and do your duty. Seventeen feet exactly; remember that until Ralph brings the book. Seventeen feet wide. . . . I say, what a jolly floor for dancing; you could slide on it. Clare, I should have a window-seat there; no, not a window-seat, you know what I mean, a settee, to catch the view out of this window. It gets the evening light."

"No. The piano goes there," Clare murmured.

"Oh, does it?" Vivien laughed. "So you've not been dreaming after all. Well, if you want to dance of course you must have one."

Not Vivien's sort of dancing, Clare thought; and yet how sweet she was with her ardent eyes, her clean, flushed cheeks, and that faint dusky down on her upper lip above the goodnatured mouth. They heard Ralph's voice.

"So here you are," he echoed. "Clare, I simply must have

a look at those stables before I go. They're the most attractive thing about the place. I had a long yarn about drainage and ventilation with Barwise, the vet., the other day. Give me that big key, Vivien, there's a love. Then you can lock up here and catch us up."

Vivien laughed softly: "Huh . . . I know what that means."

And so did Clare. It was the first time they had managed to slip her all afternoon. Now they were really engaged Vivien wasn't half so tactful as in the days before; and even Ralph seemed to forget his opportunities when he had swung the big door of the stable yard upon its rusty hinges. Clare viewed his enthusiasms indulgently; he was so definite in knowing what he wanted, and this exaggerated love of horses seemed so integral a part of him. It would be awful, she thought, if he were to feel that she was unsympathetic. She must qualify herself to share it with him; she must make herself understand and see and feel as he did.

How much a part of him this passion was she realized a week later when hounds met at Stourford. She awakened early to a sound of cracking whips and whimpers and a stamping of iron-shod hoofs on the drive, for the huntsman and his whips had clattered over from the kennels with the dog-pack. She ran to her window. The dew-frosted lawn was scattered with hounds who waved their feathery tails and sprawled and sniffed and gambolled in a restless morris of white and tan, or sat upon their sterns, staring at nothing, with their handsome, solemn faces.

By the time that Clare descended the hall was full of clinking spurs, and of the odour of leather and buckskin and melton coats that smelt of clean horseflesh. Since Sir Joseph, who preferred the smell of steel, had set off as usual for Wolverbury, Ralph did the honours of the house. Very handsome he looked with his close-shaven sanguine face above a a high white stock, fastened with a gold pin shaped like a hunting-horn. He wore a black, full-skirted coat, white breeches and black riding-boots. His eyes shone, his physical completeness gave him an air of gallantry and daring. Clare could see how popular he was with this unfamiliar breed of clean, wire-sinewed men with steady eyes, high complexions and hands made callous by habitual contact with leather, who looked like grooms and spoke like gentlemen. Ralph knew them all, he passed among them smiling, playing the good fellow to perfection, while Lady Hingston, herself smooth and dainty as a thoroughbred, sparkled among the crowd.

Now the expansion of the drive began to fill. Strangers, whom Clare only knew by name, came rolling up in jingles, pony-carts and high wagonettes. Their faces were all fresh and healthy as that crisp morning with its nip of frost in the air and its warm hues and odours of dead leaves; their eyes shone like the dew on blackberry clusters. In every face she could see an eagerness; it was as though the restless waiting pack had infected their blood.

The master gave his word. There was a sudden tumult of horses backing and turning, of stampings and curses and quick encouragement. The pack streaked away down the drive with three black velvet caps bobbing above scarlet. The word was passed from mouth to mouth: "Hell Wood . . . He's drawing Hell Wood first. With this wind he'll run into the osiers at Stourhead." Vivien waved her crop gaily. She looked unusually slim and elegant, her silk hat was no more glossy that her dark hair. She was as graceful and sleek as the chestnut mare of which she seemed a part. Ralph came up to Clare; he slipped his arm about her and drew her into

the cloakroom to kiss her good-bye. His breath smelt of whiskey. She didn't like it; and yet somehow it seemed in keeping with his flushed, full-blooded face.

"What a pity you don't ride," he said. "We must begin tomorrow. I'd love to pilot you over the Stourhead country: by Jove, that'd be worth living for. And such a ripping day! Good-bye, my darling."

He kissed her again. From the top of the steps she watched him leap on to Starlight's back and make a short cut over the dewy grass of the park. He flew like a skimming swallow. It was heartening, splendid, heroic, this sure, swift co-ordination of movement.

"Thank God that's over," sighed Lady Hingston.

By this time Clare was no longer shocked by these frequent invocations of the Almighty; they were one of Lady Hingston's little mannerisms. What was more, she knew that, even if the relief were genuine, her future mother-in-law had enjoyed the meet as a social occasion on which she could shine to perfection. It was part of the function of Stourford to do this sort of thing as well as, or better than, the other great houses in the neighbourhood. Even if Mawne Hall had possessed the covers—which it didn't—she knew quite well that the Willises couldn't have carried it off like this. The middle-classes might scoff; but the county would soon realize that when the Hingstons had bought Stourford they had come to stay. The excitement of the breakfast had left her with such an overflow of energy and acticity that she must needs whirl Clare off upon a shopping expedition to North Bromwich.

"It's far too lovely a day to go in by train. We'll drive,

and get back for tea. Are you ready?"

Clare assented, but by the time that she had spoken Lady Hingston was gone. Indeed, there was no question of refusal;

for, once having accepted her presence, Lady Hingston seemed loth to let her go. Wherever she went, in Ralph's absence, she expected Clare to go with her. It was as if she had deliberately set herself to impress her personality on Clare, to mould her to a satisfactory type in the shortest possible time. And Clare, in her new and all-embracing generosity and goodwill, could not reject this interest and kindness nor question its motives. She had begun to like Lady Hingston for herself, to appreciate the diamond-like incisiveness of the little woman's mind, to condone her violence in virtue of its honesty. By comparison with Lady Hingston all her former friends, from Miss Boldmere to Aunt Cathie, seemed blurred and soft in outline, like amateurish water-colours set against a steel engraving. Sometimes, in the back of her mind, she remembered Eleanor's warning and Lady Hingston's general reputation, but when once they were together her heart was innocent of any misgivings, completely subjected to the spell of her new protector's brilliance and power.

From the Stourford gates to North Bromwich was a tenmile drive. The pair of big greys did it in an hour and twenty minutes; on such an enchanting morning as this the distance seemed too short. Lady Hingston sat back in the rubber-tyred landau like a queen, silent in the concentration of her own ardent thoughts, an elegant, potent figure in sleek sealskin. Only once or twice she spoke in her crisp, incisive way, pointing a deprecative finger at the hollow in which the hanging woods of Mawne Hall drooped above the Stour, and the smokepall of the Mawne furnaces, suspended behind them. They bowled softly through Halesby, that bewildering mixture of beauty and squalor, and climbed the hill on whose slopes the beeches of Shenstone burned with a flame that the poet's verses have lost for ever. They passed through the high hamlet of

Tilton, where the chill air of the plateau made Clare shiver, and entered the suburb of Alvaston by the Halesby Road, a wide, smooth highway, with the dwellings of the North Bromwich plutocracy on either side: houses too exalted for publicity, yet too self-conscious entirely to forgo it. Suddenly Lady Hingston touched Clare's sleeve.

"That's Dudley Wilburn's new house," she said. "He must be doing well."

A tall block of red-brick Gothic, ornamented with stringcourses of freestone, and a pretentious porch, with mullioned stained-glass windows. At least it looked expensive.

"How foolish to build it so close to the road," said Lady Hingston. "I believe there's plenty of land. He told me that there's a delightful garden at the back."

Clare nodded. She was thinking less of Wilburn's prosperity than of his loneliness. It seemed strange to think of that handsome, competent figure living with his children in that impressive house. It was to this porch that he returned when he had left them at Wychbury. She could see him entering it, alone, and looking for no welcome; the two children asleep upstairs, and Wilburn coming in tired to so much bitter comfort. It was pitiful. It seemed to her more pitiful as she recalled the terms of his congratulatory letter, so staid, so formal, so rigidly repressed. "If only he could bring himself to marry Aunt Cathie," she thought. "I'm sure they'd be happy, and she'd simply worship the children."

It was almost as if her companion had divined her thoughts. "Dudley Wilburn ought to marry," she said emphatically. "I've told him so a dozen times. It's perverse of him. A man with an income like his ought to have the pleasure of spending Ernest, at any rate, knows how to enjoy life. Dudley's a queer, cold fish."

They lunched daintily at Battie's, and, after coffee, plunged into a whirlpool of shopping. Very different, this, from shopping with Aunt Cathie. Aunt Cathie was always a little deferential to the magnificence of the North Bromwich shops. Lady Hingston was equally, brilliantly, polite; but beneath her condescending courtesy lay a determination to get exactly what she wanted in the shortest possible time. Aunt Cathie fumbled with her purse and spelt out her address as if she were ashamed of it; Lady Hingston had actually left her purse behind, and called on Clare to pay the bill for lunch. The words Hingston and Stourford were sufficient to send any shop into a fury of anxiety to please. She ordered without asking the price of anything, and with a lavishness from which her prepotent spirit seemed to derive a reinforcement.

Before Clare knew what had happened she found herself glowing inside a fur-coat as luxurious as Lady Hingston's own. "You can't drive twenty miles on a day like this," she was told, "in a thin merino costume."

"But I've got a coat," she protested. "It's my own fault leaving it behind."

"I've seen it," Lady Hingston sniffed. "I saw it on the night of the dance, and I don't want to see it again."

"But I can't let you give me a thing like this," Clare protested.

"I haven't given it to Claerwen Lydiatt," said Lady Hingston brusquely. "I want you to remember that you're engaged to Ralph."

"But really," Clare persisted, "really I'd rathe-..."

"Don't be a little fool," said Lady Hingston shortly. It was late in the afternoon when they returned to Stour-

ford. In spite of all her activity-or, perhaps, because of it-Lady Hingston was by this time jaded and irritable. Time after time her black eyes flashed on Clare, appraising her handiwork. She smiled when Clare caught them, but their glance was guarded and wary, daring her to utter any further words of thanks or protest.

As they passed up the steps at Stourford, Parker threw wide the door. He bent and spoke to Lady Hingston in a confidential voice.

"Why can't you speak up?" she snapped. "Who did you sav?"

"Miss Catherine Weir, my lady,"

"Miss Weir?" She swept a look of offended majesty on Clare, accusing her of complicity in this unwelcome intrusion. Poor, poor Aunt Cathie!

"I'll go and see her at once," Clare suggested.

Lady Hingston's eyes blazed at her in a way that made Clare feel guilty of an impertinence. She stripped off her white veil and tossed it behind her. It fell at the feet of Parker, who bowed his head as if in honour of it. "How horribly hot it is here," she said. "Parker, will you kindly see that all the windows are opened?" Then she turned to Clare. "I suppose you'd better come with me," she said. She swam to the drawing-room door like a three-decker going into action.

In the centre of that vast chamber the small black figure of Aunt Cathie was seated on an Empire chair. As Lady Hingston entered she rose and faced her. Could it be possible, Clare thought, that this shrunken, dowdy creature was actually Aunt Cathie? Or was it the detachment of life at Stourford that enabled her to see Aunt Cathie as she really was? From the first glance Clare realized that Aunt Cathie was on, or over, the brink of one of her "heads." She was wearing a

small toque swathed in crape, whose blackness emphasized the dyspeptic flush of her complexion. Her folded hands looked monstrous and misshapen in black cotton gloves. Her bodice was constricted at the waist, and ended behind in a short, rhomboid appendage, like the tail of a duck. She wore, as usual, elastic-sided boots. In comparison with Lady Hingston she seemed incredibly mean and pitiable. Perhaps it was a sudden appreciation of the contrast that took the wind out of Lady Hingston's sails; her guns were worthy of a more considerable victim.

"Miss Weir?" she said. "How do you do? It is too delightful to know you; I was so sorry you couldn't come over the other day when we invited you. Of course I quite understood."

In spite of herself Aunt Cathie flushed with pleasure.

"I'm so glad not to have missed you, Lady Hingston," she said.

"I'm only afraid that we've kept you waiting?" Lady Hingston conceded.

"Oh, not at all," said Aunt Cathie. "I've been here just over an hour."

"I do hope they gave you some tea?"

"Really, Lady Hingston, it wasn't necessary; not in the least."

"These wretched servants have no discrimination!" It was only too obvious that they had. "You must join us in a cup at once. Clare, dearest, will you kindly ring? You must be tired," she added, with exaggerated sweetness, "after your long walk."

"Oh, not in the least, I assure you," said Aunt Cathie. "I drove over in the victoria." She spoke as if she selected it from an embarrassing superfluity of vehicles.

"Then if you'll excuse me," said Lady Hingston with the wickedest of smiles, "I must really go and make myself fit to receive you. We've been shopping all day in North Bromwich. It gets dirtier every day. Clare, will you entertain your aunt until I'm ready?"

They were alone; and at once Clare's compassion was turned to discomfort. Aunt Cathie regarded her so fixedly, so critically. "Well, Clare," she said at last, "have you nothing to say to

me!"

"Of course I have . . . lots! But I was so surprised to

see you."

"Surprised? No doubt. I didn't want to come. I only considered it my duty to drive over and see how you were getting on. You appear to be very well satisfied with yourself." Her voice was harsh and emotional.

"Who? I, Aunt Cathie?" Clare cried.

"Yes, you. Come here, Clare, let me have a look at you. Where did you get that coat? Did Lady Hingston lend it to vou?"

"No, dearest, it's a present. She bought it for me in North

Bromwich this afternoon."

"A present? Indeed. We're not so poor that we aren't in a position to buy our own clothes, my dear. H'm, sealskin. I hope you won't bring it back to Wychbury with you. Possibly you've forgotten that we're supposed to be in mourning?"

"But sealskin, dearest. . . . It couldn't be blacker."

"The lining isn't black," said Aunt Cathie. "Besides, it's the spirit that matters. People in mourning are not supposed to go dashing about the country dolled-up in expensive furs." She surveyed her own garments with complacency. "And what's that dress underneath it? Let me see. Upon my word, Clare, I can't think what you've come to! If only the poor doctor could see you!"

"But Aunt Cathie, dearest," Clare protested, "don't you understand . . ."

"Most certainly I don't, and you needn't raise your voice like that in a house that's full of prying servants."

"You see," Clare explained in a whisper, "they entertain so much. So many people come here that I simply have to . . ."

"To accept their charity," Aunt Cathie interrupted. "Oh, well, if you've no more dignity than that! That woman's condescension! Of course everybody knows who she was. It nearly made me sick."

"I thought she was sweet to you," Clare protested. As she spoke she remembered the calculated insolence of Lady Hingston's smile.

"Sweet. Yes. Exactly," Aunt Cathie bitterly repeated. "How vulgar and ostentatious this room is. There's not a stick in it that doesn't look as if it had come from Maple's last week. Haven't you any eyes in your head, Clare?" Her voice rose plaintively. "I've been sitting here looking at it for an hour and a half."

"If only you'd written to say that you were coming," Clare suggested, "we could have stayed at home."

"We. Yes, I like that word. You mean that in spite of the bore, you'd have condescended to wait for me."

It was no use trying to modify this perversity.

"My dearest, you must be reasonable," Clare cried. "I'm dreadfully sorry. I might have known. I'm afraid this waiting has brought on a headache."

"A headache?" The mere suggestion was enough to release all Aunt Cathie's pent indignation. "Nonsense! I'm perfectly well. Never better in my life. But I think you might realize

that to come over here and be stared at by a lot of insolent flunkeys, just as if I were a gipsy selling clothes-pegs. . . . And then to be smiled at in that patronizing way. . . . You're smiling yourself, Clare, You've . . ."

"Tea is served in the hall, Miss," said the voice of Parker in the tones of a dentist's assistant summoning a victim to

operation.

"I don't want any. I don't want it," said Aunt Cathie in

an agonized whisper.

Lady Hingston was wearing the black satin and pearls that had devastated Clare on her arrival. Beneath her silver nimbus her clear, pink face looked innocent as a child's. Only her eyes were wicked.

"Now, come along," she said. "You must both of you be dying for your tea. I'm sure I am. Sugar and cream, Miss

Weir? What, neither?"

Clare knew quite well that Aunt Cathie habitually took both. Only just in time her tact rescued her from the uncomfortable revelation. Aunt Cathie would not eat; and when she lifted the teacup to her lips her hand trembled. Lady Hingston, with a devilish innocence in her black eyes, continued to make the politest conversation. She talked of the Pomfrets, the only Wychbury people with whom she was on calling terms. It was disastrous. Clare could see that Aunt Cathie imagined she had mentioned the hated name on purpose. And Cathie was sitting gingerly on the edge of her chair, with her black duck's tail poking out ludicrously behind. She spoke in clipped and huffy monosyllables. At last, with one friendly, bewildered glance at Clare, Lady Hingston gave it up.

"I expect," she said, "you have a lot of private things you want to talk about. Please don't take any notice of me. I have an enormous number of letters to write. Wouldn't you like to take Miss Weir up to your bedroom, Clare dear? Or, perhaps, the drawing-room . . ."

The drawing-room had hardly been a success.

"We'll go upstairs," Clare decided. "Come along, Aunt Cathie."

"And if I don't see you again, Miss Weir . . ."

Lady Hingston held out her delicate hand. Aunt Cathie took it in a grip of damp, black cotton.

As they entered the bedroom Marguerite was in the act of spreading a dust-cloth over one of Vivien's dinner dresses that she had adapted for Clare's use. She bowed discreetly to Aunt Cathie.

"Bon soir, madame," she said, and hurried from the room.

"Who is that woman?" said Aunt Cathie indignantly. "And why can't she speak English?"

"She's Lady Hingston's maid," Clare told her. "She's Swiss Wouldn't you like to lie down for a moment, dearest?"

"Why should I lie down, Clare?" Aunt Cathie was still smarting from the affront of Marguerite's nationality. "Swiss, indeed! I've told you already that I'm perfectly well. It must be extremely unhealthy sleeping under a canopy like this. I drove over on purpose to talk to you, Clare," she went on. "No, thank you, I prefer to stand. I feel it my duty to speak seriously. People at Wychbury are beginning to talk. Of course I know that in a small place that can't be avoided; we've always kept ourselves above that sort of thing; but then, we've also been careful not to give them material for gossip. I don't suggest, my dear, that you have given them the opportunity deliberately—I shouldn't like to think that—but I do think you've been thoughtless and foolish and easily led away."

"I, Aunt Cathie?" Clare cried. "I don't understand you."

"That only shows how thoughtless you have been. Thirza had told me that her friend has seen you three times in Wychbury on a bicycle. Three times, No. Clare, it's no good protesting. Even a tricycle is hardly ladylike. But a bicycle! Such horrid, vulgar things. And at a time when you're supposed to be in mourning. Mrs. Harbord was terribly shocked. You must remember that people of our station in life are supposed to set an example."

"But dear Aunt Cathie," Clare began, "we had to go over to Uffdown to prepare the rooms. You must see . . ."

"No, Clare, I won't. Three times have you ridden through Wychbury without once coming to see me. You must have passed within two hundred vards of the house. Do you imagine that everyone in the village doesn't know about that, and realize that you've completely lost your head? It's a matter of common talk, and very humiliating, I can tell you, to me. As I've said already, I don't entirely blame you. You're young and inexperienced, and easily led away. Please don't interrupt me. I haven't finished vet.

"In my day," Aunt Cathie continued, "it was not considered proper for young engaged people to stay for long periods under the same roof. Please don't think that I'm distrustful of you or Mr. Hingston, I'm only stating a straightforward fact. When I allowed you to come over here, at Lady Hingston's request, I understood that you were only going for a few days-those were her very words-to make the acquaintance of your fiance's family. That seemed to me perfectly right and proper. But now-I don't suppose you even realize it-now you have been here more than a fortnight. No doubt you have become so accustomed to luxurious surroundings and late dinners and Swiss maids that Pen House seems too humble for you. Of course things like that wouldn't appeal to me; but I'm prepared to make allowances. What I'm not prepared to do, Clare, is to neglect my duty. As long as you remain unmarried I consider that you are under my protection; I consider that I'm responsible for you, and any thoughtless, selfish thing you may do reflects on me. It's me that the people will laugh at, Clare, don't forget that. Time after time, during the last week, I've thanked heaven that your grandfather was not alive to see it. I've talked it over seriously with Mr. Wilburn."

"Mr. Wilburn?" said Clare suddenly. "But what on earth has Mr. Wilburn got to do with me?"

Aunt Cathie flushed darkly.

"Mr. Wilburn is your grandfather's sole executor. He's our best and oldest friend. The doctor respected his judgment in everything, and so do I, and so ought you to do, if you haven't taken leave of your senses. Mr. Wilburn's a man in a million, as you'd see for yourself if your whole nature hadn't been changed and ruined—yes, ruined—by contact with these odious people. If only you'd eyes to see, Clare, Mr. Wilburn . . ."

But Clare could stand it no longer. She spoke quickly and with a white intensity: "Aunt Cathie, you needn't say any more. What do you want me to do?"

"To do?" The directness of the question had checked her flow of rhetoric. She began to hedge. "Why do you ask me that?" she said, with an uncomfortable laugh. "Ask your own conscience, Clare, not me! If you have any sense of duty left . . ."

"It isn't a matter of conscience, Aunt Cathie," Clare replied. "I suppose you mean that you want me to come back to Wychbury at once?"

THE TIME OF ROSES OF

Aunt Cathie shook her head piteously; once more the name of Wilburn formed itself on her lips.

"If you really wish it, Aunt Cathie, I'll come back tomorrow."

The unexpectedness of Clare's submission overwhelmed her. It was so sudden that the cup of triumph went bitter on her lips.

"I knew that you'd be reasonable, my darling," was all that she could mumble.

"I'm not reasonable—not what you call reasonable," said Clare quickly. "If you want me to come, I'll come, and there's an end of it. To-morrow morning. I'll be back for lunch."

"For dinner," Aunt Cathie obstinately corrected. "In that case, Clare, I think I'd better be going. No, please don't tell Lady Hingston: I've said good-bye already, and I'm sure she doesn't want to see me." She had become almost pitiable in her timidity. "Perhaps you could get one of the servants to send a message to the stables and let Jabez know that I am ready? I think I'd rather stay here until the carriage is at the door."

She went, like a thief, leaving Clare face to face with the difficulties created by her surrender. With Ralph they resolved themselves more easily than she had imagined; for she found him lazily complacent, drugged with his day's hunting. She was tactful enough to suppress the details of Aunt Cathie's argument and to suggest—with perfect truth, as she told herself—that nothing but her own feelings compelled her to return to Pen House.

"The poor thing is so lonely," she told him, "that it nearly made me cry to see her. You can imagine how perfectly awful that house must be." "Can't I?" he said ruefully, "that's the very reason why I mean to keep you out of it."

She shook her head: "No, my darling, that's the very reason why I must go."

"Why should you sacrifice your life to her?" he exclaimed. "I'm not going to do anything of the sort; but even if I were, we mustn't forget how much of hers she's sacrificed to me. Besides, the time's so short. She knows that we've got to separate for ever sooner or later, and naturally . . . don't you think it's quite natural?"

"Of course it's natural, my child, but it's damned unpleasant. I think it's splendid of you to consider her. I know jolly well that I shouldn't. But where do I come in?"

"You?" she said. "Of course you are always first. You see it needn't really make any difference to us. It'll be just like those wonderful first days when you used to walk over in the evening. You see, darling, you're always at Wolverbury during the day; even when I'm here, I don't see much of you, and when you come home there are always people about. At Pen House there'll be nobody, only just ourselves. Don't you see?"

"She'll sit and stare at us. I know the sort of thing."

"Of course she'll do nothing of the sort," Clare laughed.

"I don't know how mother will take it," he said.

Neither did Clare; but after dinner that evening, when Sir Joseph had scuttled away like a rabbit to his burrow, and she and Vivien and Ralph were left alone with Lady Hingston in the drawing-room that Aunt Cathie had found so offensive, the matter did not remain for long in doubt. It was Ralph who broached it, heroically.

"This is Clare's last night," he told her. "She's going back to Wychbury to-morrow morning."

Lady Hingston's body stiffened.

"Oh," she said. "This is the first I've heard about it. You didn't tell me that you were going, Clare."

"I couldn't very well," said Clare. "I only made up my

mind this evening after Aunt Cathie's visit."

"And what has Miss Weir to do with it?" The words were cold and crystalline as icicles, as cold as Lady Hingston's eves.

"But couldn't you see for yourself," Clare said, "how dreadfully pathetic she was? Of course you didn't know her before, so you couldn't realize the change, but it was quite a shock to me. Surely you must have noticed?"

"I only noticed," said Lady Hingston, "that she was evidently determined to make herself awkward and offensive."

"No, no, it wasn't that," Clare eagerly protested. "You don't understand. It's her shyness. Always having lived alone. She's usually strained and difficult like that. I don't know how to put it."

"I do," said Lady Hingston venomously, "and if you like, I'll tell you: I thought her whole attitude was abominably rude. And if she's always like that, I can't for the life of me imagine why you should want to go back to Wychbury. As a matter of fact . . ."

"Mother," the slow, dark voice of Vivien interrupted. She was lying curled up on the sofa like a cat.

"As a matter of fact . . ." Lady Hingston continued, then stopped. It seemed that she had lost her thread. The black flame turned on Vivien.

"Well, Vivien, what is it?" she asked irritably.

"A few days ago," Vivien drawled, "you were saying that Miss Weir ought to be pitied."

"Was I?" Lady Hingston laughed shortly. "Well, then,

I hadn't seen her. Now I reserve my pity for Clare, or anyone else that has to do with her."

"You needn't," said Clare quickly. "You see, I understand her; I know how awfully good she is. When she came over this afternoon"

"To fetch you," Lady Hingston interrupted.

"She didn't come to fetch me. She only wondered when I was coming back. You see, I was only supposed to be staying here a few days, just to get to know you. And now it's more than a fortnight. It's my own fault. I ought to have gone and seen her when we rode over to Uffdown. After all she's the only relative I have in the world. She's looked after me just like a mother all my life. Don't you think it's my duty to consider her a little?"

Lady Hingston was silent. After her first and grudging acceptance of Clare she had regarded her as a fit and promising subject for education. She had set about breaking her to Stourford as puppies are broken to the gun. To this end she had kept her jealously at her side, imprinting on her, by the very persistence of her presence, and her generosity, the mark of her potent personality. The result had flattered her sense of power. Already she and Marguerite between them had achieved a physical transformation; there seemed no reason why, in another few months, Clare should not become a credit to the firm, more plastic, if less signally decorative than Eleanor. And now her pupil was showing signs of the basest and most primitive instincts. She stood above her as a keeper might stand above a trained retriever with a bloody and mangled carcase in its mouth. There were whips in her eyes.

"You actually mean me to understand that you are going back to Wychbury to-morrow?"

The shade of Eleanor stood at Clare's elbow: Don't be put upon by George's mother, that's the great thing. She answered: "Yes."

"Even if I wish you to stay?"

"I'm sorry," Clare said. "Of course I'd love to stay here. You've all been sweet to me, you and Sir Joseph, Vivien, everybody. But I've made up my mind to go, so there's an end of it. I shall see Ralph just the same. And don't, for heaven's sake, think I'm ungrateful for all your kindness. Don't think . . ."

She hesitated, and Lady Hingston swooped swiftly into the breach:

"You needn't suggest what I'm to think or not to think. I think you're a stiff-necked little fool, if you want to know."

Now Ralph was on his feet, his wide face flushed and angry, his blue eyes burning.

"Look here, mother, I'm not going to allow you to speak to Clare like that!"

She smiled at him, as though she knew that he was no match for her. The blue flames and the black crossed in the air between them like swords. Clare clutched his hand: "Don't, Ralph," she whispered, "don't!"

Then Lady Hingston gave a quick laugh. She hated Clare's restraining influence; now that the battle was joined she needed the sting of some answering violence to justify and augment her own. She threw another challenging invitation at Vivien, who surveyed them from the sofa with a lazy disinterest. Vivien would not help her; and so, pushing herself to an artificial access of fury, she let go on Ralph.

"Yes, that's very pretty," she said. "You needn't waste your

time in defending her, Ralph. Clare can look after herself. And don't talk to me about gratitude. Gratitude!"

Before he could speak she had swept her skirts like a whirling tornado out of the room.

"I'm so sorry," Clare began.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Ralph answered angrily. "Mother's impossible." She could feel the stiffened muscles of his arm. "I shouldn't blame you if you never set foot in this house again."

"Gently, Ralph," said Vivien's level voice. She uncurled herself from the sofa and yawned. "Don't take any notice of either of them, Clare, darling," she said. "We're like that. I've told you before that the whole family's mad, except old George and father. It's our principal charm. When Ralph's as old as I am, he'll have learnt to see the joke of mother's little tantrums. Clare sees it already, don't you, Clare?"

Vivien closed her eyes, sleepy with the intoxication of the run from Stourhead Withies, and stretched her arms. Then the lids puckered, and she began to chuckle to herself.

"What the devil are you laughing at now?" Ralph burst out angrily.

"It's no laughing matter, really," said Vivien. "I was thinking of poor Marguerite. Good-night, darlings. I'm nearly dead. Behave yourselves. Oh, dear, dear, dear!" In the doorway she spoke again: "At what time do you want the carriage tomorrow morning, Clare? I'll tell Parker." Clare looked at Ralph enquiringly.

"At half-past ten," he said. "I shan't go to Wolverbury. I'd better drive over with her. I can see I shall have to draw the line somewhere."

"Brave little fellow!" Vivien mocked from the doorway.

12

THE RETURN

FROM that day, life at Pen House went ticking on as quietly as the old clock in the hall, which Wilburn had restarted. It seemed strange to Clare that the shock of the doctor's death should not have modified its rhythm, until she reflected that this calamity had fallen on its occupants with the quietness in which an aged tree sheds a decayed branch that drops from the trunk of its own weight in the stillness of night. They were too old, too deeply rooted to see catastrophe in one of the ordinary processes of nature. There was something in this vegetative calm, this perpetual and half-conscious hibernation, that made Clare long to assert her difference by some act of wilful violence, if only to convince herself that she had not fallen victim to the house's enchantment, that she was still alive. It was clear that they regarded her, if not as a returned prodigal, at least as one who had been tainted by contact with an alien world. In everything that related to the routine of Pen House they seemed assertive, and were, in fact, apologetic; which showed her that what she had lost in innocence she had gained in worldly prestige.

"Well, Clare," Aunt Cathie proclaimed, with satisfaction, "you'll find us jogging along here just as usual. We've been like this as long as Thirza can remember, and I suppose we shall go on in the same way till the end of our days. The doctor never countenanced social entertainment; he thought it was simply a sign of having no resources of your own; and so do I. No doubt it's a necessity for empty-headed people.

Nowadays folk who live in the country seem to do their best to imitate town-life; but heaven knows that even as it is, what with one thing and another, keeping the dust down and looking after Ellen, who's got a mind like a sieve, and Thirza, poor dear, whose memory is failing, my time seems as full as ever it was when the doctor was alive. From eight o'clock in the morning until the supper's cleared they keep me on my legs. Really, I don't know how other people find time for driving about the country. Every night when supper's over, I'm almost too tired to work or read, as it is. I simply fall asleep in my chair until bedtime, and then there's another day gone."

Clare offered to relieve her of some of this burden of furious superintendence.

"My dear child," said Aunt Cathie, "what could you do? A house like this has to be run on certain fixed lines, or else the whole thing is thrown into hopeless disorder. I couldn't trust it to Thirza, even after all these years. No, I've lived long enough to learn that if you want things properly done you must do them yourself, Clare, and the sooner you learn that the better for you too. Otherwise you'll only find yourself at the mercy of a lot of ignorant, slovenly servants."

The veiled allusions to Marguerite and Mr. Parker did not escape Clare. And yet, even while she proclaimed her martyrdom on the domestic altar, Aunt Cathie's general attitude was curiously kind, and, on occasions, respectful. She allowed Clare's clothes to pass without any comment on their shameful origin, and in the matter of Ralph's daily visits to Pen House she played the game so scrupulously that Ralph himself was prejudiced in her favour.

"You'd have thought to hear mother talk," he said, "that this Aunt Cathie of yours was a dragon. She isn't a bit. The poor thing looks as if she wouldn't hurt a fly. But that's

mother all over; when once she gets an idea into her head she can't help working it to death; and then one day she realizes she's overdoing it, and swings round to the other extreme. There's one good thing about her; she's never ashamed to change her opinion. As a matter of fact she's never ashamed of anything; she's more nerve than all the rest of the family put together. Do you know," he went on, clumsily, "there are times when your Aunt Cathie looks almost pretty? There's something about her eyes—not always; just now and then—that reminds me of you. If she knew how to dress, like mother does . . . if she could condescend to move with the times."

But that, of course, was quite out of the question. Aunt Cathie could not move with the times; in her life all time was stationary. It was only with the greatest difficulty that she could persuade herself that it was proper for her to leave the lovers alone when Ralph came to Wychbury in the evening. The concession hurt her more than she would confess. She would never have made it, but for the sudden, unaccountable liking that she had taken to Ralph, to his frankness, his courtesy, his astonishing lack of all the pretentiousness that she associated with the Hingstons. Perhaps there was more than this in her surrender; perhaps she smiled on their love because, with her, the season of love was now irrevocably past, because from their ardours, she recaptured, vicariously, a little of the ecstasy that time denied her.

And Clare was grateful. For her, at least, this new period in their love-making had a quality of calm freedom which she had never known at Stourford. There she had always been forced to adapt herself to new conditions, there, even in her relations with the kindly Marguerite, she had been unnatural and conscious of Lady Hingston's critical eyes. At Pen House, however shabby it might seem, she was living in

surroundings that were natural to her and imposed no strain on her behaviour; she was her own mistress, and her lover, isolated from the claims and customs of his family, was more surely hers.

The face of the dying year seemed appropriate to this placid state; it was a season of subdued light that gave no violence to the eyes; the land had sunk into a dun and russet resignation against which the brightness of their hope shone as vividly as the hips and hawthorn berries lighting bare hedgerows, or the golden death of elms that streaked the sombre plain. Often, when their busy house-making at the manor was over, they would break away up the valley, where the fishponds lay dark as Roman mirrors of steel, and the water of the brook that fed them ran brown, turbulent and unapproachable; and from there they would pass the mill, no longer sinister, and climb the bank to their old point of vantage on the barrow. But now the southern plain lay drowned, as though its ancient waters had reclaimed it: a waste of leaden fen and stagnant gleaming channels among which the elms and spires of villages rose like lost islands against the stormy sunset.

The chill of winter ran like wine in their blood, lending an ecstasy to all things warm and human, so that the ruddy windows of Pen House beckoned them with a new zest, and when they reached the drawing-room, where the fire glowed, or crackled into shadow-casting flame, they would sit for long hours of silence and repletion before the hearth, listening to the tick of the old clock in the hall and to the unhurried beating of each other's hearts. For them, as for Aunt Cathie and old Thirza, those ceaseless measures of time were vain and meaningless.

In some such moments of drugged content Clare's senses would suddenly return to her, and the familiar shapes of the

little room, which had been lost in a warm, dreamy consciousness of her lover's presence, would regain their definition. Obedient to some secret suasion, she would raise her cheek from his, and free herself from his embrace, passing in silence to the old Broadwood, where she would sit and play in the dark. Ralph never made any comment on her playing. It was better so; for, by this time, she had discovered that music meant little to him. For him it was enough to watch her lazily in the fire-lit dusk, contented with his possession; but for her these moments meant much more. Sitting at the piano, and always conscious of his presence, it seemed as if, in giving new birth to the passion of lovers long since dead, she were enabled to free her soul of a rapture and a tenderness that her body could not express, even in its moments of completest physical abandonment, even in those long kisses that left her blind and shaken. When she had finished, and her hands dropped to her knees, she would turn and gaze into the dark eyes that watched her, and her heart would cry to him: "That is all that I can give; this is the emptying of my soul. My love, my love, do vou understand?"

After they had taken supper with Aunt Cathie, Ellen would bring a lighted lamp into the drawing-room, and it was never the same; for then, even though they were still alone, their talk would be of everyday things; of the progress of the builders and painters at Uffdown Manor, of Lady Hingston's latest vagaries, of the riding lessons which had never materialized. But though Clare lent herself eagerly to these discussions, she knew that they did not really matter; that even their reluctant parting on the wintry drive and under the high Pleiades was bereft of one particular magic. The great mo-

ment had passed.

When she returned to the dining-room where Aunt Cathie

sat over her embroidery on the accustomed chair, just as though the doctor were still glowering in his on the other side of the fire and she were waiting to perform some sudden imperious service, Clare felt that she had brought in with her some appreciable aura of passion that subtly offended Aunt Cathie's virginal niceness. She knew it was her duty to obtain a kind of moral pratique before she entered this uninfected port.

"Ralph's gone, Aunt Cathie," she would say.

Then Aunt Cathie would lay down her work and take off the steel spectacles whose bridge left a red furrow at the root of her nose.

"We're very late to-night, Clare," she would say, glancing at the clock. "You know the doctor never approved of such late hours; but I suppose we have to make allowances for young people in these days. I hope you have not forgotten to put out the drawing-room light and take the coals off the fire?"

Every night, with the regularity of an evening prayer, this formula was repeated, and when she had spoken it Aunt Cathie would sigh and push back the doctor's chair from the hearth, patting the cushions as if, out of sheer habit, they still retained the imprint of his lean haunches. Then, with a smile, excruciating in its kindness, she would say good-night, and offer her cold cheek to Clare, and Clare would kiss it, not as she kissed Ralph's lips, but with a kind of devotional pity and gratitude, which her full heart was powerless, and forbidden to express.

It was enough to suffer the accusations of self-sacrifice in Aunt Cathie's eyes; Mr. Darnay's were more difficult to face. From the moment in which Clare had read his studied letter of congratulation at Stourford, she had felt that the nature of their relation was changed. When next she met Mr. Darnay she was conscious of a gulf between them that revealed itself, not so much in the words that either spoke, as in the awk-

wardness of Mr. Darnay's manner. She had always made allowances for a certain shyness that he usually showed in her company; but now he was not shy. He looked her through and through with eyes that she did not know, eyes that were not less kindly or anxious for her spiritual welfare, but veiled and lacking the transparent candour to which she was accustomed. They scrutinized her on the sly, as though they were searching her face and figure for token of the physical adventures that his celibate brain abhorred. They made her so conscious of Ralph's kisses that she felt as though the traces of them were discernible on her lips. No glance of his had ever discomforted her so acutely.

Even in the confessions, which she had now resumed, she was conscious of a certain silent eagerness on Mr. Darnay's part, as though he were waiting anxiously for the moment in which Ralph's name would pass her lips. That moment never came. Now more than ever she clung to the reservation that her early shyness had imposed upon her. She remembered the way in which he had hinted at this in his letter. Looking backward it seemed to her that he had no right to do so. Confession was a matter that lay between her and her conscience, and, as regards Ralph, her conscience suggested nothing that it was her duty to confess. In all her love there was nothing that did not seem to her inviolably sacred. She knew that Mr. Darnay could not believe this; that he was suspicious and dissatisfied; that he regarded her nature as changed; and this made her shrink from further contact with him in a widening vicious circle of discomfort and distrust.

She could not believe that she was entirely to blame. If she were changed it was only because she had adapted herself to changing circumstances. It was natural enough that she should look at everything, religion included, from a different angle

as time went on. Most of her schoolgirl enthusiasms now seemed to her extravagant in kind and in degree. She couldn't, for instance, now imagine herself fainting with delight to hear the rustle of Miss Boldmere's reseda Shantung.

At the time when she left St. Monica's her heart had been empty and eager for love; Miss Boldmere had satisfied this half-spiritual, half-sensual need by the warmth of a personal intimacy and the teaching of a mystical creed. But now the love of Ralph had filled Clare's heart to overflowing; the image of Miss Boldmere grew fainter and fainter, and it seemed to her as if the love of Christ were strangely intermingled with her human passion, informing it, inspiring it with light and beauty until she could not longer separate one from the other. And so confident was she in the rightness of this fusion, that Darnay's grudging eyes, which lamented that she had ceased to be a schoolgirl, seemed to her increasingly inhuman and threw her into a mood of opposition.

Gradually she freed herself from the tutelage of this dark figure, and was happier for it. She ceased to number herself among the devout band of spinsters who went shivering in the early morning to St. Chad's. It was enough for her to hear Mass on Sundays and on the greater feasts. Aunt Cathie, in her way, and Ralph, in his, regarded the change with relief and satisfaction.

One weekday afternoon, just after lunch, she heard the ping of Ralph's bicycle-bell on the drive. It was thus that he often announced his arrival, in order to escape a meeting with Aunt Cathie. That day there was no need for such precaution, for Aunt Cathie had already gone to rest and had passed beyond the reach of voices.

"But what are you doing here? I thought you'd gone to Wolverbury," Clare said.

He leaned his bicycle against the porch; there was a look of triumph and excitement in his eyes.

"Anyone 'ld think that you weren't pleased to see me," he said. "Let's go into the drawing-room. I've got some news to tell vou."

"Aunt Cathie's resting," she told him. "Don't talk so loudly."

"So much the better," he said; "let's go to Uffdown."

They set off together, his arm about her waist. His happiness was gay and boisterous, never had he seemed to her so radiantly handsome.

"I've got it off my chest at last," he said. "I've done it!" He laughed at her failure to understand him.

"How slow you are! This Wolverbury business. I had the whole matter out with the guv'nor this morning in the train. I think he must have been prepared for it, he took it so jolly well. Of course he knows already that my heart isn't in the job-you know where my heart is, don't you?-and that I should never make a success of it, like George or Edward Willis. Our family have always been farmers, and I suppose I'm a sort of throw-back. I loathe Wolverbury and everything connected with it; anyone with two eyes can see that. What's more, there's no necessity for me to stick there. He had to admit that. Of course he began to preach to me about an idle life being no good to a young man and all that sort of thing. He's said that so often that he probably goes on saying it in his sleep. But I'm not idle; I never have been; I'm so busy that life simply isn't long enough for all the things I want to do. It'll take me all my time for ten years to get Uffdown into decent order after the mess the Rentons left it in; and it's just about as much as one man can manage to look after you! Anyway, it's settled. I'm leaving Wolverbury; I hope I shall

never set eyes on the damned place again. I keep my holdings in the company; I told the guv'nor that if he wished it, I'd increase them out of Aunt Gillian's money; he can do what he jolly well likes with it as long as they don't worry me. But why on earth don't you say something? You are a queer kid, you know. If I didn't realize what a quiet mouse you are, I should think that you were disappointed. Can't you see what it means? I'm free . . . free!"

There, in the open roadway, he caught her in his arms and kissed her; but Clare was too deeply troubled to match him in enthusiasm.

"I can't quite take it in," she said. "You've done it all so suddenly. Don't you feel you ought to have thought it over a little longer?"

"Oh, I'm no good at thinking," he told her. "I'm sick of thinking and thinking and doing nothing. But now it's done, and you don't seem to realize what it means."

"I know one things that it means," said Clare. "Your mother will say that I've made you do it. She'll put it down to me."

"And what the deuce does it matter if she does," he laughed. "She'll say that I've unsettled you."

"And so you have! But that's beside the point. You don't know mother as well as I do. Ever since that row she's been as mild as milk. She's like that. If you'd knuckled under, when she went for you, your life wouldn't have been worth living, like poor old Marguerite's; but now that you've shown your spirit, she respects you. Honestly she does. And anyone can see from the way she speaks of you since you left that she's really fond of you too."

"She talked about ingratitude," said Clare. "That's what I couldn't stand. I'm not ungrateful, Ralph. Really, I'm not."

"Oh, gratitude! My sweet child, that word's the biggest

bee in her bonnet, she's always talking about gratitude. When the guv'nor tells her about our new arrangement, she'll say that I'm ungrateful. She'll come over the whole house like a tidal wave, and Marguerite'll get the backwash."

"Poor Marguerite!"

"Don't you believe it. If poor Marguerite didn't think the game was worth the candle she'd have left mother years ago. Marguerite's a hard-headed Swiss, and she has the whole situation balanced to a centime. Don't go breaking your soft little heart over Marguerite, or mother either; both of them know how to look after themselves a sight better than you do."

"She'll hate me," Clare persisted.

"Yes. For five minutes or five days. The guv'nor's going to face the brunt of it. Then she'll get over it and come up purring like a nice white cat. Whatever she thinks or doesn't think needn't make any difference to you and me. You're out of reach; and with me she knows better. But don't let's talk about her. Even now, you don't see what it means."

She shook her head.

"Why, what it means is this: it means that as soon as we can get Uffdown made habitable, you and I have got to be married. To-day's the twenty-fifth of November. That leaves a month to Christmas. We ought to be married early in the New Year. Now tell me, seriously, if you know of any cause or just impediment!"

"But, dearest, it's only three months. . . . Aunt Cathie's still in deep mourning."

"Aunt Cathie?" he cried impatiently: "'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.' You see I'm not such a heathen as you think. And as for mourning. . . . After all he was only your grandfather. Good Lord, how I detest this tyranny of dead people! We're living, Clare,

we're living. For God's sake, let's take as much of life as we can. You never know . . ."

"Oh, darling, don't speak of it," she whispered. The shade of his last words had fallen on her heart like night. She knew that he didn't mean them, that the idea of separation had no serious existence in his mind, yet even when they were spoken in a conventional phrase they filled her with terror. "I'll speak to Aunt Cathie this evening," she said. "It's only her that I'm thinking of."

That evening as soon as Ralph had left Pen House, she fulfilled her promise. Aunt Cathie blinked behind her spectacles and went pale as Clare spoke. Her lips trembled; at first she could not trust herself to answer, and in her eyes Clare saw a shadow of approaching loneliness which made her feel that her marriage was a betrayal. First the doctor, next herself, then Thirza; she saw Aunt Cathie's solitary life stretching onward so bleakly that she could almost have taken back her words. Gradually Aunt Cathie controlled her uncertain lips. She spoke in a voice of complete dispassionateness.

"It seems to me extremely precipitate and hardly wise," she said. "However, I will ask Mr. Wilburn. I hope you haven't forgotten to take the coals off the fire?"

13

BOTTOM DRAWER

THE date of the wedding was fixed for January the fifteenth. "Mr. Wilburn," Aunt Cathie gravely announced, "sees no objection."

Clare smiled to herself. What difference could it have made

if he had seen a hundred? And yet, in spite of her solemn anxiety to do the right thing, Aunt Cathie now showed herself so reasonable that Clare felt it her duty to humour her.

"That leaves us very little time," Aunt Cathie said. "It means that I shall have to pull everything else on one side to get you ready." She spoke as if Clare would have to be subjected to one of her heroic spring-cleanings. "I'm not going to have the Hingstons saying that you came to them without a proper trousseau, although, no doubt, they'd like nothing better than the chance."

"They're not a bit like that really, Aunt Cathie," Clare protested.

"I don't think Ralph is," Aunt Cathie admitted. "I must say that I've found him extremely natural and good-hearted, from the little I've seen of him. I confess that I don't know what the daughter's like; but if she resembles her mother . . ."

"She doesn't," Clare assured her; "not in the very least."

"Let's hope that is so . . . for her own sake as well as yours," said Aunt Cathie. "The most important thing, as I always say, is not what's on the top, but what's underneath."

"Well, Vivien's all right in any case," said Clare. "She's awfully attractive to look at, and her heart's like gold."

Aunt Cathie smiled wanly:

"You've mistaken my meaning, Clare, and you needn't fly into a passion anyway. I was speaking of underclothes, not of Miss Hingston. In my day there used to be a rule. Half a dozen of everything. But I'm afraid we shall have to exceed that in your case. Being married in the middle of winter like this, you'll need an unusual number of warm things. The doctor always used to insist on wool next the skin."

"But we're going to Italy, dearest," Clare told her, "and by the time we get back the winter will be over." "I know nothing of Italy," said Aunt Cathie, as if she were proud of it, "but friends have told me that winter on the Riviera is most treacherous. The doctor had a patient who died there, of pneumonia, if you please, and in February."

So, gradually, the half-dozens of everything took shape; a rather dubious shape, Clare thought; for when it came to making them the matronly wisdom of Mrs. Rudge intervened with careful and sinister provisions for the contingencies of matrimony that made Clare wince. She had never thought of marriage in these terms; but Thirza, it seemed, had never thought if it in any others, and gloated over her cunning contrivances with looks of unutterable sagacity and side whispers to Aunt Cathie that seemed, to Clare, obscene.

Three or four times they went into North Bromwich for shopping; not in a spanking brougham, but by rail, third-class. Aunt Cathie knew that railway journeys always gave her a headache; she embarked on them with a glazed look of martyrdom in her eyes, and carried with her in her leather bag a little phial of bromide and antipyrin, the doctor's prescription. Half of it she swallowed as she entered the compartment; half she preserved, as a kind of nauseous liqueur, for her lunch at Battie's, where she persisted in eating pastries that she knew were fatal to her.

"I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb," she said. "It's got to come in spite of the antipyrin; so I think I've a right to enjoy myself."

She did so: at Clare's expense. All afternoon they dragged Aunt Cathie's headache from counter to counter in an air stifled by the chemical odour of Manchester goods. Aunt Cathie would not be hurried; whenever Clare tried to hasten her choice she became haughty and irritable, persisting in ridiculous questions, fingering bale after bale of flannel and longcloth and

nainsook, as if she distrusted and hated the whole race of shop-keepers. Later when Clare was fainting with desire for a cup of tea, and staggering under the weight of parcels that Aunt Cathie would not trust the tradesmen to deliver, she would throw the remains of her energy into a mad rush for the station. "Tea?" she would say. "For Heaven's sake don't mention it; the very idea of swallowing anything makes me feel ill. You might have known it!"

Once, having missed their train, they sat for an hour under the station's dome of echoing glass, where the clanking of goods-wagons and the whistles of engines made Aunt Cathie hold her ears in agony. And when they reached the halt at Mawne Road she was sick. It was bad enough for Clare to see the disgust in their fellow-passengers' eyes without Aunt Cathie's looks and murmurs, which suggested that she, with her inordinate haste in getting married, had been responsible for the tragedy.

But next morning Aunt Cathie appeared as if nothing had happened, gulping down her breakfast in a hurry to unpack the parcels and get the sewing-machine to work, a process that involved the suspension of all the house's other activities; Thirza Rudge peering over the materials with her cutting-out scissors and her obscene asides, and Ellen, made stupid by excitement, standing in attendance with her mouth open. To Ellen, as she herself confessed, the whole business was as good as a play. It was a Chinese play, whose performance spread itself over a week at a time, during which the wheels of the sewing machine hummed and flickered like a chorus of bees in barberry blossom.

It was part of the penance that Aunt Cathie imposed on her that Clare should watch each moment of her trousseau's manufacture. "You may as well learn as much as you can, Clare," she said triumphantly, "for when you're married, you'll have to do all this sort of thing for yourself." It never seemed to occur to Aunt Cathie that underclothing, or clothing of any kind could be bought ready-made, or that Clare would ever be able to afford to buy it. Clare often smiled to herself when she thought of Lady Hingston or Vivien wrestling with rods, poles or perches of calico.

"You'll have to get a machine for yourself, too," Aunt Cathie warned her. In her vocabulary only one kind of machine existed. "In these days," she confessed, with an unusual concession to modernity, "it's waste of time to sew the servants' linen by hand. Of course you'll have quite enough to begin with, if you're careful; but I can't for the life of me understand what young people like you are doing with a house of that size. I suppose you never stop to calculate the expense. The amount of soap you'll use on lace curtains alone!" The buzzing of the machine rose into a scream of protest. "Why, what's the matter? Where are you dashing off to now?"

For Clare had heard the shrilling of a bicycle-bell on the drive.

"It's Ralph," she said. "I promised to go over to Uffdown with him before lunch. Before dinner," she corrected herself hastily. "A whole load of furniture has arrived, and the men won't know where to put it. I'll bring him in here."

"What are you dreaming of?" Aunt Cathie gasped. "For heaven's sake give me time to put those underclothes away!" As Clare ran to meet him she heard Aunt Cathie's voice complaining in the distance behind her: "As soon as you hear a sound you lose your head completely . . . no balance . . . no sense of dignity."

Unfortunately Aunt Cathie could never realize that her part in the preparations was not the whole of them. To Ralph

she was always indulgent; he was a stranger, and, even more significantly, a man; the doctor had trained her to defer to male opinion. But whenever Clare went with him to Uffdown, her going was treated as a frivolous defection for which it was her duty to apologize, and this unreasonable demand became wearisome; for now the interior of the Manor was taking shape, and the proceeds of Sir Joseph's generous weddingpresent to Ralph were arriving. Ralph was untiring; he never knew the moment at which Clare's strength was exhausted, so that when they came to the end of their labours in the evening she was too weary even to make love. He could not understand it; he expected her strength to match his own, and whenever she wilted or was silent he threw himself into a fever of anxiety, imagining that he had offended her or that she was ill.

"There must be something wrong with you," he said. "You're not yourself. Do you think I can't see that? For God's

sake tell me what it is."

She tried to soothe him: "I'm only tired," she said, "and goodness knows, that's natural enough. I'm not a great, big, powerful thing like you. You don't realize how little I am."

Her words melted him into passionate tenderness and re-

proaches.

"Then why on earth didn't you tell me I was tiring you?" he said. "Surely you weren't afraid to speak to me?"

"Oh, don't worry, my darling," she begged him. "I've told you I'm just a bit fagged, that's all."

But this would not satisfy him.

"I believe you're ill," he said, "and you're keeping it from me." He grew alarmed and insisted that she should see a doctor. "You're so precious," he said. "Supposing you were really ill and didn't know it. Supposing . . ."

She was forced to laugh at him. "I think you might take

my word for it," she said. "The truth is that you know nothing about women. You can't always expect them to be at their best. As Vivien. Besides, I've told you already. I'm a bit tired."

"And no wonder," he said, "considering the way in which this business is dragging itself out. It's another six weeks before the fifteenth, and every week seems like a year to me. We made a mistake not to fix it a month earlier."

She smiled at his impatience. Once it had troubled her; but now she was getting used to it. She was so tired that when he left her she could have fallen asleep in the drawing-room chair. It was strange to think that for him time dragged in its passage; for her it went whirling past at a speed that bewildered; the day had no sooner begun than it was ended and weeks went by like days, passing so quickly that she felt like a swimmer fighting against a current with the roar of dangerous rapids deafening her ears. How dangerous they were she had not time to think; the hints and whispers of Mrs. Rudge suggested mysterious horrors. Aunt Cathie had never been married; but the portly Thirza had shot them on three courageous occasions, and should know. She and Mrs. Harbord, who now relieved her in the kitchen, had knowledge enough between them to face Niagara. Why were they so secretive with their knowledge? Why should they speak in lowered voices and with mysterious signs?

She told herself that she was being frightened needlessly; that marriage, and even the greater mystery of child-bearing, was, after all, the common lot of womankind. She thought of her own mother, boldly embarking on a far more dangerous adventure. She wondered if she had lain awake and held her breath before the same uncertainties; and it seemed to her the cruellest fate of all that she was not alive to hold her hand and

whisper in her ear. Through all those wakeful hours that delicate figure, whose shade she had invested with such love and graciousness, seemed tantalizingly near to her. At times her presence was so real that Clare could almost persuade herself into listening for the voice that she had never heard. But no voice came; and so she comforted her loneliness with the memory of Ralph, of his strength, his honesty, his gentleness.

"Perhaps he is just as puzzled and anxious as I am," she thought, "and I'm behaving like a selfish little brute. What is the use of pretending that I trust him in everything if I don't trust him in this? Oh, my darling, my darling, if only you know how silly and unworthy of you I am!"

At Christmas time the fierce rhythm of this too-rapid life was broken by a visit to Stourford. Aunt Cathie also was invited, but refused the benefit of any concession on "that woman's" part. She could never forgive the Stourford drawingroom for being what it was. As a protest against it she intensified the deepness of her mourning, appearing, on the day of Clare's departure, in a hot aura of crape. Clare gathered that Mr. Wilburn had approved her attitude; for though his visits to Pen House had ceased at the time of her engagement. Aunt Cathie continued to write to him enormous letters, marked "confidential," which she formally sealed in Clare's presence, as though she thought that they would be steamed open in the kitchen.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't leave me for Christmas, Clare," she said. "I am used to being alone. The doctor always despised women who were without resources. I shall read Romola-that will be most appropriate, since you are going to Italy so soon-and I shall finish all those cambric chemises. I've told Thirza to buy a chicken. The very thought of cold turkey makes me ill. They're such immense birds."
"I shall be back again in three days, dearest," Clare assured her.

"No doubt you will have a gay time," said Aunt Cathie dolefully. "A quiet person like myself would be totally out of place. Besides, I suppose I must get used to being without you. I don't suppose I shall see much of Thirza. I've allowed her to invite her friend to dine with her, and Ellen, of course, will go home to her parents on Christmas Day."

By this time Clare had deliberately steeled herself against these harrowing resignations. She knew that Aunt Cathie would be much happier in the company of George Eliot than in that of George Hingston. She kissed her good-bye with an untroubled face, and the embrace which Aunt Cathie returned was surprising in its warmth and tenderness.

Even on this occasion the approach to Stourford seemed formidable; there was no knowing with what new brilliant variation of the offensive Lady Hingston might not confound her; for since the day of the wedding had been fixed they had only met among the crowds which ebbed and flowed through the hall at Stourford like people at a railway station. Then Lady Hingston had treated her with a sort of gracious contempt, acknowledging her presence as a harmless, necessary evil; now she might make a final protest against the evil's necessity.

She did not. The Hingstons were people who, apart from its religious significance, took Christmas seriously. The festival had feudal aspects that they were anxious to preserve. It gave them a chance of showing their tenants the benignity of the old régime—new style—at its best; and the process was so exacting that Lady Hingston's energies were absorbed in it. She was too busy to think of quarrelling with anybody, and the addition of

a new helper, even in the questionable shape of Clare, was welcome to her.

On Christmas Eve they made a feast for servants and tenants in the long music-room. After dinner the room was cleared for dancing, and Clare found herself revolving solemnly in the arms of Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker breathed nosily through his nose, for, in ordinary life, such rapid movements were not compatible with his dignity. His eyes were busy all the time watching for any signs of impropriety in the behaviour of his staff. He bore Clare round the room as carefully as if she had been an entrée. From first to last his lips uttered no word; and Clare was almost thankful that they didn't, so convinced was she that, if words came, they must take the shape of, "Ice pudding or meringue, Miss?"

Marguerite did not dance. Not even with Ralph. No doubt she felt that knowledge of her dissolute nationality might tempt the footmen to unseemly advances. She sat upright and superb, an emblem of invitation and discouragement, unconscious of the sprig of mistletoe that hung above her head. Vivien and Lady Hingston were everywhere, like bright birds thridding the constrained and sombre company. The sullen loveliness of Eleanor's eyes followed them wherever they went. She was more lifelessly beautiful that night, Clare thought, than ever before. Her two children, little Harold and Enid, came romping to her knee, but not even they could bring a breath of life into her face. It seemed incredible that anything so vital as they could have been born of Eleanor's coldness. And like a soul strayed out of some distant circle of purgatory into another, Sir Joseph Hingston moved shyly round the room's outer edge, always wavering toward the door by which he might have escaped, always recalled to his melancholy duty by his wife's black eyes.

Suddenly, when she least expected it, he threw himself upon the mercy of Clare. It was embarrassing, for she had never been alone with him before, and on her former visit he had not seemed to be aware of her existence. He sat with one leg awkwardly cocked above the other, his bald head sunken between his shoulders, and began to talk in a low monotone about her grandfather. The subject carried him back to the days before the overwhelming prosperity of Wolverbury. He spoke of them almost with regret.

"We had a neat little works in those days," he said, "and if it hadn't been for the boom that followed the Franco-Prussian war I expect we should be there still. That war was a marvellous thing for the Midlands. It made our friend Walter Willis, as well as me. War's a grand thing for iron. But Walter Willis"—he shook his head—"there's something wrong with him. He's a clever fellow in his way, is Willis; but his head's not steady enough; he can't stand oats, as our Ralph would put it. I don't say that Mawne isn't a fine concern to look at. It's all right on paper, my dear. But when the slump comes, as it's bound to, folk like Walter Willis 'll have to put on their thinking-caps."

He lowered his voice to a whisper, almost as if he were making confidences to a fellow iron-master. Clare listened intently, though she could not understand half of what he was saying. He began to talk of the new Sedgebury Main Colliery, the masterpiece of the red-bearded Furnival whom Clare had met at Stourford two months before.

"Walter Willis has gone into that like a mad bull," he said, "and our George is every bit as wild about it as he is. I'm chairman of the company. I couldn't get out of it. You see they wanted my name. Well, well, they can have it. But when it comes to money . . . I'm not a geologist, my dear.

Fortunately, we're in a position to pay for the best brains in that line, the same as any other. Kneeworth—he's the professor at Astill's College in North Bromwich, you know-Kneeworth says Furnival's right. Well, maybe; I don't know. But one thing I do know, and that is that my old grandfather worked down that pit hewing coal for thirty years, and I can recollect sitting by him, just as it might be you, my dear, and hearing him say: 'You mind my words; I can smell water in that pit,' and whenever I hear Furnival speechifying these words come back. George says I've got water on the brain. Maybe he's right, but I've got summat else as well, as we used to say."

He stopped and stared in front of him into the glazed eyes of Parker leading a quadrille. Then, clumsily, he patted Clare's hand.

"I'm glad to have had this bit of a chat with you," he said. "I can see that you've got a heart, Clare, and our Ralph's a lucky chap. He's right to have cut himself out of Wolverbury too. He's not built for it any more than young Willis is, though his dad won't see it. That's what I meant just now. D'you see? No, we've no room for passengers in concerns like ours. What's more, you've helped me to make up my mind about this business of Furnival's. It's extraordinary how a quiet talk puts your ideas in order."

His hand went fumbling to his waistcoat pocket, as though his mind, concentrated on Wolverbury, grudged the energy necessary to direct his fingers. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and slipped it into her palm.

"I made this out for you this morning," he said, "and you may as well have it before twelve as after. It's just a trifle to buy a bit of hair-ribbon with, as they say. Don't lose it, there's a good girl! And now I think you might give your father-in-law a kiss under the mistletoe."

Clare did so willingly. Before that evening she had always thought of Sir Joseph as remote, and possibly unfriendly, so detached from all humanity had he seemed. Now she realised that the Sir Joseph of Stourford and the Sir Joseph of Wolverbury were different beings, and that when he was torn away from his works he left the greater part of his personality behind. In all the long meanderings of their talk the smaller fragment had been straining away from the music-room in the direction of its complement. Thanks to her silence it had almost succeeded in its quest. He kissed her; even his kiss was curiously impersonal; and then, fired with unusual courage, he hurried from the room. Vivien pounced upon Clare and dragged her into a set of lancers. Later, when she had time to look at the paper which he had put into her hand, she found that it was a cheque for a thousand pounds.

Nor was this astounding document the only one that excited her during her stay at Stourford. Ever since the announcement of the wedding, presents had been pouring in; for trade, in the North Bromwich district, was booming, and most of its wealthier manufacturers were eager to stand well with the Hingstons. Ralph took their generosity for granted. He had been brought up in a house where luxurious possessions counted for little; but to Clare the accumulations of presents that blew into the library like a snowdrift from every quarter of the compass were almost terrifying; they seemed to turn her wedding, which hitherto she had considered as an affair that concerned nobody but themselves, into a public event. It made her thank Heaven that the actual ceremony, which was to take place at Wychbury and from Pen House, would be more in keeping with her modesty.

On Christmas Day the family dined in state. They played the game of peace and goodwill so effectively that if Parker

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had not been in their service for years he might easily have imagined that they were as united as they appeared to be. They all drank Clare's health and Ralph's in a magnum of Pommery: a dangerous experiment; for Lady Hingston was already reacting from the democratic good-humours of the night before, and alcohol, in any form, was apt to make her irritable. At once she began to lay down her own law on the subject of Eleanor's nurse and the conduct of Eleanor's children; her black eyes flashed; her accusations became more and more outrageous; it was as though she were giving Clare an exhibition of the kind of thing that she would have to put up with when she and Ralph were married. But an instrument keener than Lady Hingston's tongue was needed to pierce the apathy of Eleanor; for lack of fuel her violence blazed away as harmlessly as a fuse that stops short of detonation; and Vivien, dashing in gallantly to the rescue with some calculated stupidity, saved her mother's face.

It was a dull evening; for though they pretended that they were enjoying themselves, they were all too familiar and too individual to find amusement in each other's company. No doubt it was partly this lack of communal interest that had compelled them to make Stourford the open house it was. When the children had been packed off to bed, and the effects of the champagne had evaporated, long periods of silence fell upon them. Little by little the artificial bonds were loosened and the company began to split up into its natural grouping. Lady Hingston took out a pack of patience cards. George and Sir Joseph edged away towards the library, where the cigars were kept. Vivien and Eleanor sat talking with voices lowered for fear of disturbing Lady Hingston's concentration on her cards. Ralph leaned over Clare's shoulder from behind and whispered her away into the morning-room. As they stole out together

Clare felt as furtive as if she had pilfered the drawing-room silver; but when they passed the card-table Lady Hingston looked up with a smile so charming that she was compelled, by a sudden impulse, to stoop and kiss her.

"Why did you do that?" Ralph asked her afterwards, a little jealously, as if all her kisses belonged by right to him.

"I don't know. I wanted to. I'm like that," she told him. "Yes, it's like you," he agreed, "but awfully unlike the

rest of us here. Imagine Eleanor!"

"Poor Eleanor," she said. "It's tragic that anyone so beautiful should be unhappy."

"Don't waste your sympathies on Eleanor, my child," he laughed. "Eleanor's as hard and sharp as a piece of high-speed tool-steel. We're a hard lot, if you only knew it."

By the time they left the morning-room everybody but Mr. Parker had gone to bed. Ralph switched off the light at the end of the corridor and took her to her bedroom door. For a long while he would not let her go.

"You were right to fly back to Wychbury," he said. "It's simply unbearable to have you in the house here, so near, all the time, with only this damned door between us. Why should we be separated in this stupid fashion? Why should I leave you like this, just when I want you most? You're mine, Clare, and I'm yours. Why, in the name of reason, should I let you go? You can't honestly say there's any sense in it."

"Three weeks, my darling," she said. "Only three weeks."

"Oh, Clare, what a cold-blooded little thing you are!" he cried. "Are you pretending? Don't you understand?"

"Yes, but you're so impatient," she whispered. "Now let me go, my darling."

He released her unwillingly. "Three weeks," he said. "It's like three hundred years."

14

PROTHALAMION

THREE weeks, two weeks, then one.

One evening, to Clare's surprise, Aunt Cathie announced that Wilburn was coming by his usual train and staying to supper. Luckily for her the Hingstons had accepted an invitation to dine with the Willises at Mawne that night, and, in Ralph's absence, Clare was free. It was the first time that they had met since her engagement; and she was fluttered to receive him, for in spite of the authority with which Aunt Cathie now persisted in investing him, she could not forget how much his friendship had meant to her in earlier days.

When she heard the grating of Jabez's wheels upon the drive she ran to open the front-door. Wilburn entered, massive in his dark overcoat, and met her eagerness with a formal handshake. He looked to her worn, worried, and, somehow, older. His heaviness damped her enthusiasm and made her shrink into herself again. He did not mention her engagement, nor even the Hingstons' name; and this seemed strange to her, for she knew that he was always in touch with Wolverbury. No effort of hers could bring a hint of lightness to the supper-table, and when the meal was finished, he produced a roll of legal documents, which he handed to Aunt Cathie without speaking. This was no business of hers, Clare thought, and so prepared to go.

Aunt Cathie looked up sharply. "Where are you off to, Clare?" she said. "You'd better stay here. This is a matter that concerns you."

She went on reading seriously without another word. Wilburn leaned over to Clare and explained. "Your wedding settlement." he said.

The phrase meant nothing to her. She did not know that such a thing as a wedding settlement existed. She and Ralph were going to be married, and it seemed grotesque to her that so simple and intimate a matter should be complicated by protocols like a treaty between two hostile powers.

Aunt Cathie finished the document and handed it on to her.

"This seems very satisfactory," she said. "Clare had better read it for herself."

"I don't want to in the least," said Clare. "For one thing, I shan't understand it. Besides, I'm sure there's no necessity for anything of this kind."

"That," said Aunt Cathie, "is a matter for your lawyer to judge. Of course it is necessary. Dudley, I wish you would explain to Clare what it is all about."

This was the first time that Clare had ever heard Aunt Cathie make use of Wilburn's Christian name. The shock was so great and the implication so perplexing that she could scarcely listen while Wilburn explained.

"It's just the usual thing, Clare," he told her. "Experience shows that marriage is a rather uncertain state. A number of things might happen. Your husband might go bankrupt; in which case you'd be destitute. At some time you might have differences that compelled you to separate from him . . ."

"But that's ridiculous," Clare broke in. "It's absurd to think of such a thing. We're not that kind of people, Mr. Wilburn."

He paused and looked at her with a slow smile in which were mingled admiration and pity for her generous resentment.

"Or supposing," he went on steadily, "your husband were to

die suddenly with an ambiguous will, or, perhaps, no will at all."

Clare shuddered: "I can't even think of it."

"My dear child," said Aunt Cathie, almost kindly, "you mustn't take up an emotional attitude. You know the facts of human life as well as we do. It's our duty to face them in a rational manner, as the doctor always said. Ralph has signed the paper that Mr. Wilburn's explaining. You're simply being sentimental."

"I'm not sentimental, Aunt Cathie," she answered hotly. "It's only . . . it's only that I can't bear to admit that it's even possible."

Aunt Cathie went on muttering something about facing facts; Wilburn turned over his papers uneasily.

"We'll say no more about it if it hurts you, Clare," he said. "I'll only explain the provisions that have been made for you. Mr. Hingston is settling a thousand a year on you, together with the use of Uffdown Manor during your lifetime, or until your eldest son attains his majority. As a matter of fact, he's also executed a will that's quite in order. I have it in my office, and I can assure you, as far as that goes, that you need have no anxiety. I shall keep this settlement as well, so you needn't give another thought to it. Incidentally, he's done me the compliment of making me trustee. I'm sorry it's upset you. I didn't imagine for one moment . . ."

"It hasn't really upset me," Clare assured him, "only that one part of it. I'm sorry I behaved so stupidly. It was just . . ."

Wilburn helped her out of her difficulty. He rose and patted her shoulder. It was the first sign of humanity she had seen in him that evening, and the surprise of it almost unnerved her.

"I want to wish you every happiness, Clare," he said, "from

the bottom of my heart. Ralph Hingston's a lucky fellow, and a good one too, I think."

"Oh, Mr. Wilburn," she said, "you don't know how good

he is."

"Oh yes, I do," he laughed. "I know all about it. I've been in love myself. But don't forget your old friends altogether." "I shall never forget that you are my friend," she said.

And yet, later, when he had gone and she was alone, the memory of the night-black shadow troubled her. The idea of disagreement or separation was one at which she could afford to smile out of her faith and security; but the other she could not dismiss so easily from her mind; for she had been accustomed to take it for granted that their love had sprung from an eternal seed, immune from time or mortality. Yet here, on the very verge of its fulfilment, were sober-minded and not illnatured people making assurance against the shears of fate. Their care seemed impious and hateful, and vain in its materialism; for if she should lose her love she knew that the possession of all the world would mean nothing to her. For love such as theirs, she thought, there could be only one proper end: a common and instantaneous annihilation. The suggestion that she might have children could not change her mind. Children were lovely playthings. So she had thought when she romped with Eleanor's twins at Stourford; but the idea of having children of her own was nothing to her but a distant and delicate dream. Even if she had no children, she told herself, she would be contented; for her heart had no room in it for any but Ralph's imperious image. He was husband and child in one; in himself the completion of all desire. She saw him now, in the closed brougham, driving home from Mawne; and as she closed her eves she seemed to feel the firmness of his lips against her own and the soft hollow of his eyes and his Crisp, fair hair. In the security of this possession she fell asleep. On the afternoon of her last day at Pen House and of her maiden life, Clare was kept busy packing her new initialled trunk for Italy and stowing in others the remainder of Aunt Cathie's half-dozens, which Jabez, in her absence, would drive over to Uffdown to await her. Now, once again, the pace of time had quickened, since the things that had been left till the last moment were too many to be contained by it. All through the day she had been unable to count on Thirze's or Aunt

over to Uffdown to await her. Now, once again, the pace of time had quickened, since the things that had been left till the last moment were too many to be contained by it. All through the day she had been unable to count on Thirza's or Aunt Cathie's help; for Aunt Cathie, in spite of mourning, had decided that the doctor would have wished his granddaughter to be married decently, and both of them were busy, in kitchen and dining-room, preparing refreshments—not a wedding-breakfast, she insisted—which should prove to the Stourford party that, without the least pretentiousness, the Weirs were as good as they.

The lower storey of the house was full of movements and whisperings and savoury smells. Of course Mrs. Harbord was there, exalted from her traffic in sticks of liquorice and bottles of herbal beer to Thirza's lieutenancy; for Thirza would not allow that Ellen to poke her clumsy fingers in anything, and wanted company. Nor could Aunt Cathie dream of letting Ellen, with her special talent for dissolving china in her hands, set touch upon the antique services of Spode, blue Worcester and Crown Derby which left the shelter of their accustomed cupboards. She washed them, every piece, with her own hands, fingering their fine glaze with a reverence which was the deepest that she knew; and Ellen, unwanted in kitchen or in dining-room, was sent upstairs to help Clare with her packing.

An Ellen speechless and abashed, who handled Clare's fine tissues as reverently as Aunt Cathie handled her old china, an Ellen that Clare did not know, with pale, awed face, and

big eyes that seemed to be upon the point of crying. So strangely, mutely emotional did she seem that Clare was at some pains to joke her into the naturalness and confidence that were usual with her. In vain; for Ellen was in no laughing humour. They worked away until nothing was left except the clothes that Clare was wearing and those in which she was to be married and travel on the morrow. Then came a fearful wrestling with the straps of her Italian luggage. The heavy domed trunk refused to close beneath their double strength.

"Don't worry, Ellen dear," Clare said at last. "You'd better call Jabez."

"Old Jabez?" Ellen cried indignantly. "Why, Miss, I'm

stronger than what he is."

She threw herself, in a final effort, upon the recalcitrant lid and closed it.

"There now!" she said, and at that moment collapsed into loud tears. It was difficult for Clare to deal with this unreasonable outburst. In the ordinary way Ellen was not emotional. She could not imagine what accumulation of feeling had found this ungainly outlet. Ellen had sunk to the floor like a sack, and clapsed her knees so desperately that the impact of her weeping nearly upset Clare's balance. She did her best to comfort and restrain her.

"Why, Ellen," she said, "you mustn't cry like that. What is the matter with you? Don't cry. Just tell me what it is."

It flattered and half amused her to think that her going should have affected Ellen so deeply. Her hands, caressing the bowed and agitated head, encountered the tight mass, shaped like a teapot handle into which Ellen's hair was twisted.

"Surely you're not crying because I'm going away?" she said. "You shouldn't in any case, because I'm so awfully happy, and I want everyone else to be happy with me. I'm not going

away for ever, you know. We shall be back in a couple of months, and then you'll come over to Uffdown and see me on your afternoon out."

"No, Miss, it isn't that," Ellen gulped between her sobs. "At least it is and it isn't. It's seeing you so happy, Miss, and going off like this on your honeymoon into foreign parts, just like it might be a dream, when I'm that down and werrited, Miss, I could make a hole in the canal. It was seeing them shimeezes that started it, and the drawers. I run up three pairs myself, leastways mother did for me. Lovely things they were; but I reckon I might as well chuck them in the ash-pit for all the pleasure I'll ever get out of them. Or give them to her. She'll have more use for them nor me. Twenty-seven pounds, too, I got saved in the Post Office for the furnishing. And Jim knows it, Miss; he's seen the bank-book with his own eyes. They always say they're changeable, Miss; but Jim Moseley—well, you'd never have thought it of him, not if you'd known him particular, like I have."

"But what's the matter with Jim Moseley?" Clare enquired. "I don't quite understand. Surely you and he have been walking out for the last two years. You don't mean to tell me . . ."

"Not walking out, Miss," Ellen corrected her. "Far beyond that, Miss. That was a year ago. Ever since the Jubilee we've been courting. And all the public knows it. The young lady at the Post Office made a remark when I put the last sovereign in. 'I suppose you'll be married before long, Ellen,' she says. 'Yes, miss,' I says, 'as soon as we've got enough for the furniture.' 'Well, Ellen, you're getting on,' she says, 'judging by the book and barring accidents,' she says. 'Don't speak of it, miss,' says I. And the very next Sunday, Miss, last Sunday that is, when you was over at your young gentleman's, I saw my Jim

stroddling along arm in crook with that chitty-face that's house-maid at the Vicarage. He seen me too, did Jim: I know him that well; I can look through the back of his head. He told her I was coming up behind; I know he did. They both started laughing, Miss, and went on up the lane as peart as peacocks. I knew where he was taking her, too, I wonder he had the heart. We always used to go that way."

By this time Ellen's indignation had got the better of her distress. She stood up, panting, with tears flashing in her neutral eyes and two big patches of red upon her cheeks, so warm and human and tremulous that she seemed almost beautiful.

"Well, that's all over, Miss," she said, with a twisted smile. "You must excuse me for telling you. I know I oughtn't; but the sight of them underthings all laid out ready got the better of me, and I feel more myself, like, now that I've spoken out. It was like a worm, Miss, gnawing and gnawing in here." She clutched the breast of her print dress as though the pain were still inside it.

"Someone had better speak to Jim Moseley," said Clare, "and show him how badly he's behaving. Perhaps Aunt Cathie . . ."

"Oh no, Miss. That wouldn't do. I shouldn't like Miss Cathie or Thirza to know about it; and I couldn't demean myself by letting anyone speak of it to Jim. You've no idea what a good boy he is, Miss, really. He may get over it. There's naught to be done that way. There's only one thing, if I might make so bold as to mention it."

"Don't be foolish, Ellen," said Clare, "you know you can tell me anything."

"I do, indeed, Miss Clare. Now that Jim's gone, you're the only one I can speak to. How I wish you wasn't going

away! No, Miss, I can't say that. That's downright wicked of me. But it's like this: I can't for shame to stay on here in Wychbury, where all the public knows how it was with me and Jim. I've got to go away, Miss, somewhere where I bain't known; leastways, until my Jim gets his senses back. I was wondering if you could find room for me at Uffdown. It's more out of the way like, and you know, Miss, how fond I am of you. I reckon I've finished with men for good and all. I'd like to stay along of you to my dying day, like Thirza, if so be that you'd have me."

She seized Clare's hand and kissed it clumsily. The moment was so affecting that tears came into Clare's eyes. She compelled herself to be reasonable.

"You know, Ellen," she said, "that I couldn't possibly steal you from Aunt Cathie. You're very happy here."

"Not when you're gone," said Ellen. "Miss Cathie's all right, but old Thirza, she gets more fussy every day. It's 'Ellen this,' and 'Ellen that,' till my head's all moithered. No, Miss, I've got to leave here in any case; and I don't want to go into service in North Bromwich; I'm not like other girls. If only you could say you'll have me if I'm free. And I'm that fond of children!"

Clare laughed. Ellen's naïve imagination went so fast. And yet she gave her promise. When Ellen had left her the poignancy of this minor tragedy, so heightened by its contrast with her own content, dwelt in her thoughts and subdued them until the bell summoned her to supper below.

The greater part of the dining-room was now occupied by the table, extended with two leaves, on which Aunt Cathie had displayed her answer to the vulgar splendours of Stourford. She had reason to be proud of it. Everything that fine linen and bright silver and the rich hues of old china could accomplish had been done. Clare found her, pale, but calmly triumphant, at a small tea-table which Thirza had laid immediately in front of the fire. Their supper was cosy and intimate. The fire drew so brightly under the frosty sky that when Thirza had cleared away, Aunt Cathie, who was too tired for needlework, told her to put out the lamp. For a long while they sat on in silence. Clare knew that this was no time in which to tell her of Ellen's troubles; and, indeed, they were soon forgotten, so heavily did the significance of this last evening together press upon them both.

Out of that quiet firelight a new, strange vision of Aunt Cathie was created in Clare's mind, a vision sweetened and humanized by the memory of all the years they had spent together. For the first time in all her life Clare seemed to see her, not as a conventional figure vested with painful authority, capable of sudden, bewildering kindness, but as a woman, like herself. It was this human relationship that she had never appreciated. From earliest childhood she had taken Aunt Cathie for granted. Now, peering backward into those dim recesses, she began to question the meaning of little things that she remembered, and all the incidents that obstinately and illogically rose and challenged her out of the darkness, clamoured for interpretation.

They appeared from the most unlikely levels of her past life, kindnesses and small injustices commingled. She remembered, for instance, one summer day—she could not say how many years ago—when Aunt Cathie had slapped her for a lie that she had not told. She remembered another evening, earlier still, when Aunt Cathie had suddenly caught her in her arms and hugged her till it hurt. That must have been in summer too; a moth was fluttering round the chimney of the lamp and dashing itself against the opal globe. That globe had passed

away into the limbo over which Jabez presided, the ashpit by the second apple-tree. Again she remembered Aunt Cathie, chill and judicial, standing above her box on the eve of her first term at St. Monica's; herself a lanky little girl in short skirts and black, ribbed stockings. She remembered the alarms which Aunt Cathie had soothed and explained. There was no end to this smoke of arbitrary memories; and in all of them Aunt Cathie appeared, always the same, a presence, not a person.

Yet, as they cleared and faded, she began to realize more and more the deepness of her debt. She saw that through all these nineteen years of dim half-consciousness Aunt Cathie's care had shielded and her wisdom directed her. There, as she sat, Clare knew that it was this sombre, fading woman who had made her what she was, for better or for worse. Without her she might not even have been alive, and if she were living . . . thought could not carry her further; but a wave of love and gratitude, unquestioning, all-forgiving, rose in her heart, engulfed her, and threw her, she could not say how, at Aunt Cathie's knees. She found herself sobbing there, her head buried in Aunt Cathie's lap; she heard Aunt Cathie's voice, strangely distant, and most strangely soft.

"Clare, my little Clare," she was saying. "It's better that you should cry if you want to. Don't take any notice of me, my darling, I understand. There, there now . . ." Aunt Cathie's own voice wavered curiously.

"I only wanted to tell you how I love you, dearest," Clare sobbed.

"Yes, yes, I know. And I love you too, my darling. I don't always show it, I'm afraid. But that's how I'm made. The doctor was just the same. Now that he's gone . . ." She swallowed pathetically and stopped. "You see, Clare darling, I'm getting on in years. No, I'm not really old. I know that. But when old people die and young ones go away from you, there's a sort of emptiness. I'm not exactly frightened of being alone, Clare; it isn't that. I'm used to it, in a sort of way. The doctor wasn't what you'd call a companion. And yet when he was sitting there night after night I felt—it's difficult to say—I felt that somehow things were all right. But after to-morrow . . ."

"I know, dearest, I know," Clare said. "That's what makes me so unhappy."

"But you mustn't be unhappy, my child. And you aren't unhappy really. You must be happier than you've ever been before. I don't grudge you your happiness. It's far the most important thing I have left in my life. You see, Clare, it's a kind of happiness that I shall never know, and yours is the nearest I can get to it. You mustn't pity me, darling: I'm quite . . . resigned isn't exactly what I mean . . . contented, that's the word."

She paused for a moment, then went on dreamily:

"I suppose that's partly why you're so precious to me, Clare. I've always thought of you, right deep down in my heart, I mean, as if you were really my own baby. There was another reason. I don't believe I can bear to tell you . . . Yes, I will . . . Clare, darling, this is a thing that I've never told to anyone, not even to the doctor. I don't think your mother even knew about it. I was in love with your father. He gave me to understand that he was in love with me and let me go on loving him. It was a lie. It was cruel and horrible of him. Even when your mother went away with him, up to the very hour, I thought he loved me. It nearly killed me, Clare. It did kill part of me. Part of me's been dead ever since that day. I expect that explains why I can't say all the things that I want to; there's something that won't answer, just as if some nerve had been cut. For quite a long time I couldn't bear anyone to look

at me or to look at anyone. I hated everything, everything in the world until I began to love you; and even then I hated myself for loving you. Of course that was a long, long time ago. Twenty years. Now I never think of it. If I did, I couldn't have told you. It's passed out of all reality. Why, if he came into the room at this moment, I don't think it would disturb me. I could forgive him if there was anything to forgive."

There followed a long silence. Clare felt that to speak would be a sacrilege. Yet during this long confession she knew that Aunt Cathie and she had attained an understanding that they had not known before. A sense of loyalty, confirmed in complete knowledge, made her heart glow with a goodwill more satisfying than her impulsive love. She was so confident in their unity that, at last, she dared to ask if Aunt Cathie knew where her father was, or if he were still alive.

"I don't know," she answered calmly. "I don't think I want to know. He must still be a man in the prime of life, well under fifty. Possibly he is still in Canada. He married again, you know, that was why you came here. He didn't want to take you with him, or, perhaps, it was his wife. I'm sure it was better for all of us."

Better indeed, Clare thought, for if he had taken me with him I should never have met Ralph, and Ralph would have married someone else, which would have been monstrous and intolerable.

"I think you had better go to bed early, Clare, darling," Aunt Cathie was saying. "You have a big day in front of you to-morrow. If you feel restless you can come into my bed. You must do just as you feel."

"I think I shall sleep quite well alone, dearest," Clare told her.

"Then I'll come in and kiss you good-night," said Aunt

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Cathie, smiling, "just like I used to when you were a little girl."

These final interviews were all distressing. In each of them Clare had to bear the shock of the various emotions that her conditions aroused. At the foot of the stairs Ellen was waiting with the excuse of some improbable duty. She did not speak but, as Clare passed, she clutched her hand and stole a long, moist kiss. Laughing, Clare hurried upstairs. In the door of her bedroom Thirza Rudge was standing.

"Why, Thirza, what are you doing here?" Clare cried.

"Just seeing that Ellen's put everything ready for 'ee, my love," said Mrs. Rudge. "Well, well, my handsome, God grant that this is the last night in your life as you'll sleep alone." Her soft eyes gloated over the prospect. "Marriage be a queer old game, Miss Clare, and needs some understanding. There's some maids takes to it like a duck to water, and some as can't never put up with it. There was my Alice now, as I said to my friend this mornin' . . . but that's not here nor there. You never know until it comes to you, and there's no call to get scared beforehand. There's happy marriages and unhappy, as I always say. But one thing I'll tell you, my love, and if you're a wise maid you'll never forget it." Her voice sank to a mysterious whisper: "Always oblige your husband in the bedroom," said Thirza Rudge.

BOOK THREE CLARE HINGSTON



I

TRANSIT OF VENUS

DURING the next week the fate of that friend of Aunt Cathie's who had died of pneumonia on the Riviera in February was often in Clare's mind. The lights of Paris resigned themselves to a watery death; between them a funeral cortège of huge-caped coachmen dragged slowly over the stone setts of the boulevards. They crossed the Alps in the thick of a mist of snow, so still, so listlessly suspended, that it seemed as if the rarefied air were slowly crystallizing about them; through this white silence the train thundered down into Italy, like a thing which had taken fright at the spectral mountain-shapes that thrust their bleak and monstrous summits through the crystalline veil. At Turin the snow had ceased, but through its wide streets and endless colonnades an icy wind blew downward from the Alpine barrier.

"If this is Italy," Ralph said, "why, give me Wolverbury. The next honeymoon I have I shall try Iceland."

He grumbled all the time, half earnestly and half in jest; for already they had made the discovery that they were not the responsible married people that they had imagined themselves to be. In this new, engrossing pretence Ralph was a little boy, in whom the most outrageous speech and behaviour were

smiled at and forgiven by Clare, his indulgent mother; while Clare, in the shameless innocence of an affected childhood, shed all the modesties which she had gathered round her since the days of St. Monica's. Sometimes she stopped to ask herself if this abandoned stranger were really herself, and wondered what Aunt Cathie would think if she saw or heard her; but these questionings filled her with amusement rather than shame; she found it a whimsical paradox that she and the shy girl who had knelt on the chancel steps at Wychbury were really one and the same. Smiling to herself, she took a new and proper pride in the completeness of her abandonment. All reticence seemed cowardly and half-hearted. In the complete fusion of body and soul that she desired there was no intimacy that love could not hallow, no modesty that was not shameful and unworthy. It was her privilege to give not part of herself, but all, and more than she knew. She gave passionately with open heart and hands; there was no end to her happiness in giving; and though the wind drove down from ice-bound Alp and Apennine their hearts were warm; their love was a glowing crucible in which all baseness melted away and only gold remained.

Each day Clare seemed more beautiful to herself and in Ralph's eyes, with a loveliness confident and serene. All through the wintry cities of Italy they passed southward, surrounded by their own enchantment, carrying Spring captive in their train; and beauty rose to meet them as though she were glad of their possession. For their ecstasy was not that of hope but fulfilment. Beyond the passing moment or before it they could see nothing, nor wished to see; within it, life surrendered its ultimate essence. There was nothing more that they could ask of it. The universe was theirs. My beloved is mine and I am his. So, through the death of winter, Clare sang her Song of Songs.

Spring surprised them. When they left the train at Naples a tramontana was blowing the smoke of Vesuvius seaward from his snow-streaked cone, and petulant dust-storms whirled about the dark and frozen streets; but as they woke next morning to a lazy consciousness of life and of each other, Clare saw that the louvres of the Persian blind were barred with a gold that set her heart on fire. She raised herself on her elbow and looked at Ralph. He lay beside her, his fair face flushed with sleepiness. He smiled and surveyed her with lazy satisfaction through his half-closed eyes.

"The sun is shining," she told him. "I must get up. The

bell's on your side. I wish you'd ring for colazione."

"Do it yourself, you little nuisance," he murmured sleepily. "I was just dreaming. I dreamt hounds were drawing the Stourhead osiers. A ripping morning for scent. So you see what a mess you've made of it."

"You're just like a dog yourself," she told him. "You're al-

ways growling and hunting in your sleep."

"Oh, Clare," he yawned, "I wish to heaven you wouldn't call them dogs. A hound's a hound, you little silly. I've told you that before. And you haven't said good morning to your husband properly either."

She laughed and slid above him, so that her lips were on his. Then she released herself from his arms. She rang the bell for breakfast, and ran to the window where the golden light barred her white feet. She dragged the blinds sideways; sunlight dazzled her. Then she flung wide the windows and held her breath.

Immediately beneath her the green-black crown of a stonepine leapt out above the clustered roofs of Naples. Beyond, from Ischia to Punta Campanella, the gulf spread its floor of shimmering sea, bright as the skimming body of a kingfisher, but paler, with the satiny lustre of an Adonis butterfly's wing. The dark, volcanic coast of the Sorrentine peninsula, and high St. Angelo stood clear, blue, opaline, like a frozen cloud, or a cloud given substance by some magic warmer and softer than that of frost; and like blue cloud becalmed in shapes of precision that no cloud ever attained, the crags of Capri swam above the horizon's gentle bow, islanded in air, like the lands of Brendan's vision. And all the space in which this peerless intaglio was set was so enriched and interfused by light that it acquired a shining texture of its own. The air itself seemed one vast scintillating diamond.

Down in the well-like streets below her, life was already stirring, as into a flight of sun-hatched ephemerids. It teemed with movement and colour. It rose, in a bright babel of speech and song. It passed through the open windows, this pullulating flood, buoyant and radiant on the crystalline air. It permeated Clare's flesh and ran through her limbs, bidding them dance. It burst from her lips in unbidden laughter.

"Oh, Ralph, get up, get up!" she cried. "My darling, you don't know what you are missing. Do, do come quickly."

He rolled out of bed and came clumsily to her side at the open window. He passed his arm about her waist. Her flimsy nightdress slipped smoothly over her polished skin. He frowned at the sunlight, and stood in silence; for it was Clare's beauty, not that of the gulf that engrossed him. She was so smooth, so slender and so soft. There was no end to her white body's loveliness. The waiter knocked at the door and called "Permesso?" She started away from him.

But all through that day, and others that followed, Naples infected and inspired her. For Naples is not Europe, but rather some isolated fragment of the sunken Tyrrhenian land whose life resents its new climatic epoch, and only reveals itself when

the sun is shining. Daily the sun shone, in a windless, halcyon blue; and beneath it the sordid alleys festooned with multicoloured washing hung out to dry, the scabrous piazzas with house-fronts of painted plaster, the bright-tiled cupolas of neglected churches, shone like the flower-market stairways of the Chiaia. And Clare herself was like a flower, a daffodil that has freed itself from frozen earth, dancing and glancing in the sun. She was lithe and palpitant, like the lizards that stole out to sun themselves and lay with quick-beating hearts under the tarnished palm-trees of the park. Like them she was swift and darting, as though her inherited darkness had taken fire from some lost spark that smouldered in her northern blood.

She was so swift that Ralph could never keep pace with her. This full light seemed a cruelty to his misty Saxon eyes, more fit for wide fields of green and cloudy woodlands. The sun that inspired her filled his long limbs with languor. Like a tired Goth he stalked beside her, magnificent in his fairness, slow-moving, slow-spoken, aloof, and a little contemptuous of this vivid, vivacious race.

In the north Clare had dragged him like a captive through miles of picture galleries and museums. He had submitted to this penance because he could not bear to be separated from her, and because he understood that this was the right thing to do. He realized that all her eager cultural aspirations, the seed of which had fallen on her from Miss Boldmere's albums of foreign travel, were foreign to his nature. He could not guess their meaning and was distrustful of their value; and yet he was so jealous that no part of her should escape him that he followed her, and even underlined his Baedeker over his pipe at night. But in Naples, to his relief, Clare's passion for the fine arts seemed to forsake her, and his head was no longer troubled with the barbarous names of cinque-cento painters. She

was engrossed in life rather than art; her quick eyes sought its varieties with an unintelligible eagerness; she could not have enough of it; and so they sat for hours on the terrace of a café commanding the tangled central knot of the city's activity; Clare with her eager brain delighted by the coloured pageant that passed before them, he, with a half-litre of pallid beer to sip, appraising the quality of Neapolitan horses, roused to proprietary resentment by the bold glances of dapper cavalry officers that Clare's alien beauty attracted. The horses were not so bad, if only these fellows wouldn't hammer their hoofs to perdition on the stone setts; the beer lacked body; Italian tobacco was unsmokable. He wondered if he could get a parcel of civilized honey-dew sent to him from Oxford by post.

The chilly mornings, for all their sunshine, brought back to his thoughts the miry lanes, the smell of leaf-mould along the covert-side, the whimper of hounds breaking silence, the thudding of hoofs on turf, and, at the end of glowing days, a hot bath with a sprinkle of ammonia in it. The bathroom at their hotel was like the temple of a forgotten cult, and he himself the sole and stubborn worshipper. By the time they reached Uffdown the Woodland Stourton's season would be nearly over. Naples was a city; and he was country bred. But the wine of Gragnano, of which he drank a bottle every evening a dinner, made him see the charms of Parthenope and Clare in another light.

He felt thankful when Clare had exhausted its possibilities of excitement, and decided to move on. Ralph would have been more happy if they had turned their faces homeward; but, every morning when she opened their windows, the shape of Capri had beckoned her. They still had a fortnight left, the first in March, and nothing would satisfy her but that they should spend it in peace upon that dreamy island. As well there

as elsewhere, he thought; for in spite of an occasional twinge of northern nostalgia, he knew that he could be happy anywhere with Clare; the spell of her magic still lay so heavily upon him that he was grudging of anything that distracted her from absorption in himself. On Capri they would be alone. So much the better.

The winds conspired to make their segregation more complete. On the day they left Naples the alchemy of scirocco turned the golden gulf to lead; a white-capped swell drove inward from the spray-shrouded island, and brought Ralph's Midland heart into his mouth. The little steamer rode it like a dancing cork; she was tossed skyward, then wallowed in sickening glaucous troughs. He watched Clare greenly as she climbed into the bows. The warm, grey wind rushed through her hair; the salt spattered her face and whipped the blood into her cheeks; she knew the exultation of man that rides the waves; she found herself singing down the singing wind, secure in its boisterousness that nobody could hear her voice.

When she returned to him she was ashamed of her rapture; his face was blanched and pitiful, and his smile so wry. So she settled down beside him and held his hand as though he were a child; her maternity embraced this limp and sea-defeated creature who had always seemed to her so strong. It amazed her to think that his strength should need the protection of her, who was like a baby in his arms; but she would not let him know what she was thinking for the world, so she subdued her storm-excited spirits and was very tactful.

That night the south wind veered to westward. The unprotected anchorage of the island was swept by seas so savage that for two days no steamer could disembark. Once on dry land, Ralph could afford to laugh at waves. The roar of the sea encompassed them; the mountain-tops were stripped by a

gale that seemed an extension of the loud sea's savagery, carrying in its talons sheets of salt rain that might well have been snatched upward from torn coamers. Lizard-like the inhabitants of the island kept closed doors; the wet pavement of the little piazza was empty and bright as steel, and yet, between the wind-harried bursts of rain, an obstinate sun shone whitely, and the air was as warm as that of a wet English May.

This more familiar weather put new life into Ralph; the moist air loosened his sinews and stimulated them to an answering violence. All the lassitude of their sedentary town life disappeared. The sight of the forlorn streets inspired him to assert himself and show these soft Southerners that English people were not afraid of rain. Clare was not loth to share this sudden birth of energy. Storm sent her blood tingling no less than crystalline calm. They set off together scrambling over the island paths which the rain had converted into so many singing torrents. They hung, like brown wind-buffeted kestrels, under the crags, while the sea boiled a thousand feet beneath, or the wind blew the waves of tortured olives below them into flaws of streaking whiteness that simulated foam.

The wind was soft, for all its violence, and laden with the scent of the last narcissus, still lingering in sheltered crannies of rock, and sudden wafts of single, purple-flowered stock, self-sown on grassy ledges that even Ralph's hardihood could not reach. Clare went hatless in the wind; her hair was decked with crimson strawberries of arbutus that Ralph had stolen from the macchia. Never in all their wanderings had they known such a gay carelessness, such youth, such nice adjustment of physical well-being as in that strenuous week of storm; never had the country food seemed so enticing, nor wine more generous, nor sleep so dreamless in its satisfaction.

The wild wind backed. Once more it blew from the north;

first keenly, with the thrust of an icy blade, from the serrated snows of the Apennines, and then more gently, till the sky cleared and the sea subsided into the shimmering halcyon calm that they had already known. But now the easy island life had permeated Ralph's blood. Their little room, with its wide windows facing the vertical cliffs of Monte Solaro where they shot into the southern sea, had become homely, familiar, a shrine of remembered delights. The sun reflected from the green banks of the olive groves was no longer the enemy that had blinded him in the white streets of Naples. He still remembered the sea-passage with discomfort; but life went so well with him that he began to count the dwindling days with regret. Indeed, there seemed no reason why they should not prolong their stay in Eden.

"It isn't as if there were any real necessity for us to hurry back," he said.

"Except the end of the hunting-season," she told him, mischievously. "You'd never forgive me if I brought you home too late for that."

"I don't know," he said, reluctantly. "I think one might amuse oneself here all right. I'm always seeing fellows going about with odd-looking muzzle-loaders on their shoulders. Yesterday, down below Anacapri, I put up three woodcock, and that porter chap told me that the place'll soon be stiff with quails."

She smiled at his earnestness. Often her smiles puzzled him. "Besides," he went on hastily, "you know perfectly well, my sweet, that I should be happy anywhere with you."

He held out his arms to her; she laughed and eluded him. "No love-making on the edge of precipices! I've told you already there ought to be a close-season for that sort of thing. Oh, Ralph, you're perfectly dreadful!" she said, though her

lips encouraged him. "Are you never, never going to get over it?"

"Never, my sweet one, never, as long as I live."

And so the last day dawned in a still radiance that seemed to mock the foolish haste of their departure; the pale sea lay smooth as polished marble with pools and veinings of indigo and malachite; the land seemed to be lifted above it, swimming in opaline air; an island of mirage, as Clare had seen it first from her Naples window. But when the sun began to climb no strand of mist clung to it. The craggy contours of Solaro shone above them in chiselled clarity, cut like a gem; the macchia of the foothills, rain-refreshed, sparkled like one gigantic emerald. They knew it would be a crime to miss one moment of this brilliant air, so they made the hotel-keeper cut them sandwiches of anchovy and mottled salame, and set out up the mountain together.

At the corner where the rock road narrows to a giddy ledge an oak-wood lifted dry branches, ochre yellow, against the deep blue sky. They stopped to take breath and to gaze at them.

"You see what a fraud this island is," Ralph said, "it isn't really Spring. The oak-buds at Stourford must be as far advanced as these."

She laughed at him. He was always ready to find an incongruity that showed how much better ordered everything in England was.

"How you will label things," she told him. "Of course, it isn't Spring. It isn't any season. It's just living. But if that isn't Spring, it's awfully like it. Look . . . look!"

The lower slopes of the mountain up which they climbed were dusted with peach-blossom of so ethereal a pink that it seemed to hang among the dark foliage of orange-trees and loquats like a suspended flight of butterflies. As they climbed higher among the brushwood, the blossom beneath resolved itself into a pale mist; above them the limestone crags impended in clear, hard shadows and gleaming pinnacles of white. Women were crouching among the *macchia* in ungainly postures, reaping the wiry growth with short-handled sickles, cutting and tearing by turns; from the bruised and lacerated stems there rose to meet them a savour, hot, pungent, aromatic, issuing from the oily sap of myrtle, lentisk, rush and creeping rosemary; and as she breathed it Clare's thoughts fled back to Uffdown, to the grey garden with its bushes of rosemary from which, on their first visit, Ralph had plucked her a sprig.

"Whenever we walk in the garden at home," she told him, "and smell the rosemary hedge we shall be able to think of this day. That's for remembrance, my darling. And then—you know what funny things scents are—we shall be able to recall all these other smells. We shall have to close our eyes and think of nothing. I know how it's done. I've often taken a school book and recalled St. Monica's. Attar of Capri: that's the name I shall give to it."

Now they had climbed right under the pinnacles of sunbleached rock. A little cleft, like the gap in a stone wall, admitted them to an unsuspected plateau, hidden in the mountain's crown. Here the banks were mossed with moisture; bramble and bracken straggled down them; the whole air tasted moist and sweet and English; the turf was dappled with gardens of a sturdy orchis, with blood-red uprights and velvety purple falls, that Clare had never seen. Another world, they said; but this was not the world for which they were seeking.

They found it, their desire, on the cliff-side westward of the hermitage of Cetrella, a high and stony eyrie, under cascades of lithospermum, bluer than Ralph's eyes. From it their imagination could swoop in swift and easy flight through blue air

downward upon the coloured cubes of Capri, spilled beneath them like a child's box of bricks, or, sailing further afield, rise to the purple crags that crown the Sorrentine peninsula, the wolf-haunted chestnut forests of Sant' Angelo, the dim recesses of the Gulf of Salerno, and sea that stretched to Sicily. "... up into a high mountain," Clare thought, "and showed him all the kingdoms of the world." Yet all the kingdoms that she desired were in Ralph's heart and her own.

They ate their lunch and talked in their new language of those little things out of which they had made their own world. The wine that Ralph had insisted on bringing with him made them somnolent, as did the murmur of the sea, and the resinous air that whispered through the Aleppo pines behind them. Ralph spread his long limbs and was soon fast asleep. His gentle breathing was only another soothing sound, and Clare soon followed him, her dark head rising and falling on his breast.

How long they slept she could not imagine. She was wakened by a swift rush of air above her eyes, the dark passage of something incredibly keen and rapid, like the swish of a scimitar. She wakened with a start, and saw, a hundred feet below her, the spread wings and rock-blue body of a peregrine falcon whose flight had skimmed her eyes. They had lain so still that the bird had taken them for stones.

She roused Ralph, who was still sleeping heavily, and told him what had happened. The sun was sinking. He yawned, confessed that he was chilly; but the brisk walk upward to the pass soon brought the blood back to their limbs. At the gap in the wall they faced the red sun setting southward of Ischia. They watched it founder in a white and glassy sea. Below them the village of Anacapri lay darkening with long shadows; through the lanes that converged upon it they saw slow figures, bowed beneath enormous burdens, winding wearily homeward

from their work beneath the olives. From all the chimneys of the village smoke rose into the air and drifted slowly along the base of the mountain like mist. Through one great cleft that seemed to lose itself in sea the olives, too, were like a downward-curling smoke. Suddenly from the belfry in the little piazza the agitated clamour of the Angelus rose above the hushed, clear rumour of the disappearing village. If they hung upon the mountain longer they might stumble on the stones. They hurried down. It seemed to Clare that something with a mystical significance had come to an end. She did not regret it.

"There has never been a day like this," she told him.

"Never a day like this," he repeated.

And never, they thought, would there be such another night. When they went upstairs after dinner the full moon had risen and filled their little bedroom with enchantment. The light was so silvery and strange that Clare protested against the sacrilege of candles; so they did without them, undressing in the fantastic shadow. For a long time they would not sleep. It was too beautiful to sleep. They lay, almost silently in each other's arms, and each seemed strange to the other, when their eyes met, yet no less wonderful. For Clare knew that this mysterious visitant was a god among men; and to Ralph her moony whiteness was of an immortal texture.

2

UFFDOWN

AT Uffdown Manor, Ralph had decided, they would run to earth. There nothing should disturb the continuity of their absorption into the secret and enthralling manner of life which they had discovered in Italy. This beatified state was to be maintained jealously and indefinitely. United they were self-sufficient. All intrusions would be discouraged. If people insisted on visiting them they must be prepared to take the risk of being embarrassed by a pair of unconventional lovers. They called themselves unconventional; the word had a sound that pleased Ralph's arrogance, But Mrs. Rudge would have known better.

They arrived at Wychbury in a flurry of April snow. The station platform looked more forlorn than usual. Mr. Hemus, the porter told them, was in bed with influenza. They drove up to Uffdown in the shining brougham, with the new coachman, Bissell, whom Ralph had engaged, on the box. The village street was empty; it allowed them to pass without disturbing itself, though Clare, half-bold, half-shy, peered out of the carriage windows to look for familiar faces. She saw no soul that she knew, save Mr. Wilkins, the undertaker, trudging along with his collar turned up and an elm plank over his shoulder. She would have waved to him, out of her excitement, but wasn't quite sure if the occasion on which they had met was sufficient to constitute an introduction.

Ralph appeared a little conscious of his dignity as Lord of Uffdown returning to his Manor.

"You're like a jack-in-the-box, Clare," he told her. "It's no good trying to recognize anybody. Nobody with any sense 'ld be out of doors on an evening like this. I wish we'd put in another day in London. It's a pity we missed seeing Finney dive at the Westminster Aquarium."

There was no moon; the one that they had left serenely sailing above the crags of Capri was now obscured by the earth's shadow; but the brand-new carriage-lamps swept a moving beam along snow-sprinkled hedgerows, and showed Clare that their life was still asleep. And yet the smell of them! As she

drew the familiar humid air into her lungs, the memory of Italy faded from her like an escaping dream. It was here, here, in the heart of a moist, Atlantic country that she belonged. The poignance of this emotion made her clasp Ralph's gloved hand. He smiled and returned her pressure.

"Who, but a couple of fools," he mumbled, "would think of coming home on the first of April?"

Beech-mast deadened the whisper of the carriage wheels; the roof of the columned lane was blacker than any night. Bissel touched up his horses; the beam of the carriage lamps shone on the lucent leaves of laurel bushes. The front of the house glowed like a lantern; every window ablaze, casting out light on to the lawn's snow-powdered surface, on to the pancakes of snow that clung to the horizontal cedar branches, on the congealed and half thawed borders that marked the junction of grass and flower-bed, undercut, like ice that hangs on the edge of a stream. Out of the black earth within them rose spikes and budded heads of the daffodils that Clare and Ralph had planted in September.

The brake grated in its ratchet, the horses stamped, and Vivien was on them, jumping into the interior of the brougham like an untrained puppy, grasping Clare's hand and Ralph's, kissing their snow-chilled faces with her eager lips. So warm and welcoming was she that she seemed a bodily emanation of all the house's light and comfort.

"You dears," she cried, as she dragged them in. "I want to look at you. Take off your coats so that I can see you properly. No, you've not changed a bit. Only Ralph's fatter—exercise is what you want, my boy!—and Clare has got more colour. Where did you get that frock, Clare? Paris, I'll be bound. Of course, I haven't seen it before! Oh, I do hope you dear people'll be comfortable. I've lighted fires everywhere—simply tons of

coal—but you're sure to feel the cold after all that sun. We scarcely notice it. I wish you'd stop me talking. You must both of you be longing to change out of your travelling clothes. Do come along upstairs."

She laughed. They all three laughed together. From the dark panels of the hall, Sargent's portrait of Ralph, brilliant in hunting pink, surveyed them with a good-humoured smile, as though he were pleased with his double's return.

"How awful I am," Vivien burst in again. "I'm talking just as if the house were mine instead of yours. It really feels like mine, Clare. I've been here in full possession for three days. How funny it looks to see you and Ralph going into the same bedroom. I can't believe vou're really married. Dear, dear, and I'm forgetting all my messages! Mother, Ralph, darling. She sent her love to you both and asked me to say how sorry she was. She's laid up with this influenza. We've all had frightful colds. Poor Parker's actually been in bed for a week. And Clare, dear, your aunt was over here the day before vesterday. She said something about some maid of hers that's leaving. Ellen, was it? Oh, my poor memory! I do hope you'll find everything as you like it. The water hasn't got cold, has it? Clare, vou darling, I simply must kiss vou again. You look splendid. Evidently it suits you. Oh, did I tell you? Eleanor's had her baby, another girl. Mother is furious, and says it's Eleanor's fault; but Eleanor, apparently, doesn't see the joke."

She left them. The room was as quiet as if a thunder-shower had passed. How soft and cosy and homelike it seemed after the impersonal bedrooms of hotels! Ralph had vanished; Clare heard him whistling in the adjoining dressing-room. This room was theirs; not for a night or a fortnight, but for always. It had a snug, close-fitting, luxurious quality, like a well-made glove. Clare's eyes saw with delight small things that she had

carefully chosen for herself, strange, yet familiar and subtly comforting; she had chosen them so long ago, in another life, that they seemed like benignant ghosts gathered round her. Everything looked somehow more complete than she had imagined it would be, all ready waiting for her in its appointed place. The whole room seemed part of her, as the shell is part of the snail.

Ralph came back out of the dressing-room in his shirt-sleeves and caught her bare arms.

"Well, my sweet, what does it feel like?" he asked.

"Like us," she answered, as though the one word represented an all-embracing criterion.

She was so happy. And yet, as she took her place at the foot of the oval mahogany table in the dining-room, she knew that she was no longer the self that she knew. The richness of her new possessions did not embarrass her; she accepted without question the fiery scintillations of cut glass, the gleaming napery and chased silver, the silent ministrations of the well-trained strangers who were her servants. She listened, smiling through the long meal, to Vivien's ceaseless, eager chatter about people and things at Stourford; and yet she knew that her attitude towards the room in which they sat and life in general was different from Vivien's, or her own, as she remembered it. Her mind was sober and contained. She knew that she was the responsible owner of all this strangeness, its controller and director. In the very carriage of her body she felt that the pliancy and amorphousness of irresponsible youth had disappeared; its fibre had stiffened, not with pride, but with seriousness and the desire to do justice to the possessions by which she was now possessed.

And, as the first weeks went by, it seemed to her as if the spirit of the house had actually taken her in hand, and set

about moulding her to the shape of its sober dignity. She had thought of it, at first, as her creation. In a little while she began to wonder if her new self were not created by it, so gracious and well-proportioned, so foreign to all her old ideas, was the influence that it shed on her. At times she would actually see it as a personality, setting its spiritual seal upon the living things that had grown up about it, the cedars, the beeches, the humble lawns and flower-beds, no less than on its inhabitants. In this anthropomorphic reverence she would treat its unspoken judgments as oracles, anxiously waiting on its mute approvals and disapprovals, applying them as a touchstone to matters of everyday life. It was a curious game that she played with herself, and one to which Ralph and Vivien, for obvious reasons, were not admitted; but, in the end, it became so intimate a part of her ordinary mental processes that she would speak to herself in terms of it, and accept its visionary standard as part of a new religion, applying them, unconsciously, to the visitors who now began to call on her.

They were many; and that, again, was partly the fault of Uffdown Manor. Uffdown was known as a calling house. Its inhabitants had always been included in the invitation lists of the northern corner of the county; the horses of the country gentlepeople stopped at its doors as automatically as, in the days of coaches, coaching teams would stop at stages.

Uffdown was the extreme northerly limit to which the "county" reached. Immediately beyond it there began a zone of dubious gentility; houses that once had been respectable, such as Stourford, Mawne Hall and Cold Harbour, now regrettably fallen into the hands of new North Bromwich people. The Hingstons were new; far worse, Lady Hingston was known to be clever; the county shivered at stories of her tongue's corrosions. The Weirs, on the other hand, had a

record of several hundred years of minor gentility, and Ralph, having finally dissociated himself from traffic in base metals, of which iron was the basest, had sent a handsome subscription to the Worcestershire hounds, with whom he now proposed to hunt, and backed it up by showing himself a sportsman over Worcestershire hedges. Mrs. Pomfret, whose husband was a late survival of one of the big families dispossessed, had certified that Clare was neither vulgar nor clever, and the county decided with relief that the advanced station of Uffdown had not fallen again into the enemy's hands, and that they might continue to call there without risk of offence or infection.

One after another a strange variety of vehicles rolled up the Uffdown drive, discharging a series of supporters of the old order; the Misses Abberley (barony extinct), two hunched little things in black lace dolmans that looked like performing shrews; Squire Tardebigge, who drove a seedy tandem in irreproachable style, and spent the regulation fifteen minutes in putting on and off his dog-skin gloves, while Mrs. Tardebigge, in claret velvet and a bustle, deplored the irreverence of Miss Marie Corelli-"Say what you will, Mrs. Hingston, the woman has power!"-the Dowager Lady Lovell, of Moreton Starkes, a thin, grey woman who once had been a beauty, and. saving her title, something rather worse, accompanied by a lady-companion, excessively genteel, in a jet toque that bobbed and twinkled in time to her continual twitching smiles at Lady Lovell's witticisms on the subject of the poor Miss Abberleys; a horde of Ombersleys and Powyses, all rather shabby, horsey, doggy, all marvellously self-composed, and most contriving to be acutely critical beneath a mask of quite admirable manners.

The type was new to Clare. Intrinsically they did not interest her; and yet she liked them, because in their kind they seemed a natural product of the land that lay upon the edge of the Black Country's advancing desolation, a fauna gradually growing rarer, with whom she sympathized in their approaching extinction. But what endeared them to her more than anything else was their attitude toward Uffdown.

The house, she learned, had once belonged to the Ombersleys, and though the Ombersleys had been forced to sell it, had remained dear not only to the remnants of its owners' family, but to other members of the same caste. Uffdown was not a great house, but, for all that, it was respectable. It was part of a tradition, and, as such, they revered it. When they drove up to call on Clare their eyes moved eagerly in search of alteration or innovation. They were jealous, not of Uffdown's beauty, but of its integrity as a landmark. Clare saw the most unlikely people clinging to it like ghosts unwilling to leave the scenes of their first life; all the county society of that corner of Worcestershire was a little ghostly; there seemed to be no people of her own age among them, and most of them were so conversant with the house's history that she had only to lead them on to learn things that were valuable to her cult.

Many of them referred to an old Miss Betty Ombersley as the principal authority. Miss Ombersley was older than the Queen, and remembered Uffdown in the early thirties. She lived alone in a black and white house on the skirts of the village to which her family had given its name, and everybody assured Clare that she was far too old to leave it. Mrs. Pomfret achieved the impossible, and drove her over in triumph, a tiny creature in a bonnet like the Queen's, with jutting, inquisitive features and a voice that seemed an echo from her own girlhood.

It was a great excitement for Clare to receive her, and also a great responsibility, for Miss Ombersley looked so fragile that she seemed likely to die on her hands if she were questioned too closely. Luckily contact with Uffdown filled her with a mystical transfusion of life. She passed from room to room, leaning on her ebony stick, her long skirts trailing behind her. She moved as quietly as a cat, sniffing the air as if to test its authenticity. There was no need for questions. All the time she kept up a running, distant commentary to herself, to which Clare listened spellbound, and Mrs. Pomfret nodded approval, like a keeper rejoicing in the sagacity of his ferrets.

She sniffed at a wainscot: "Here there used to be panels." She pointed to the ceiling: "This one was painted by a Neapolitan gentleman, a political exile in the Emperor Napoleon's time. Roger Ombersley protected him. No doubt the colours faded with damp and the Arkwrights had it replastered. In Ferdinand Ombersley's day these two rooms were one. The Arkwrights had them divided and put in the sliding-doors. I imagine it would be enormously costly to restore them."

She looked anxiously up the oak staircase, mounting it in imagination, for her poor little legs would not permit her to ascend. Mrs. Pomfret, who treated her throughout as a small performing animal and her exclusive property, announced the exact moment at which she should be fortified with tea. She took it in Clare's drawing-room, now beautified by the gleaming ebony of the Bechstein grand that George and Eleanor had given her.

"This," she said, "is the room that is haunted by the ghost of Annabel."

"It's my favourite room of all," Clare told her. "I can't say that I've ever felt anything ghostly about it."

Miss Ombersley shook her head. She was too polite to say that no person so unlike the Ombersleys as Clare was likely to be capable of such refined perceptions.

"Poor Annabel died in seventeen sixty-three," she said. "She

is supposed to have been in love with the author of *The School-mistress*, the poet Shenstone. She was a great wit and musician. The Ombersleys were always a cultivated family. Mr. Pope wrote some verses for Annabel's seat in the Dutch garden when he was on a visit to the Lyttletons. The Arkwrights destroyed it. Uffdown is not what it was."

Clare was so conscious of her possible share in the Ark-wrights' black guilt that she implored Miss Ombersley's approval of what she had done; but the old lady would not commit herself further. "The less you do the better, my dear," she said, and left Clare with the feeling that it would be a vandalism to remove a grain of dust from anything that was subject to Annabel's ghostly security.

On a bookshelf at Pen House she found a complete edition of Shenstone in two volumes that the doctor had picked up at some sale, and these, out of respect for the vaporous Annabel, she would read, on sad Spring evenings, in Annabel's own room, finding in their artificial elegiac mood something in keeping with the formal graciousness of the age to which Uffdown still belonged; for, to her, the house seemed always to be looking backward on peaceful, ancient things, and she was now so full of life and hope that the contrast gave her a sense of rest and stability.

Ralph viewed these new devotions with the patient but charitable misunderstanding that he had shown toward her religious phase. That, strangely enough, had fallen into a decline ever since the day of her marriage. Strangely, too, she did not regret it. She accepted the change as one of life's mysterious growth-adjustments, as unquestioningly as a young tree might regard the modifications forced upon it by conditions of weather or soil. The days of her first enthusiasm seemed to her to have belonged to another life. She smiled when she remembered how

once she had imagined Ralph and herself kneeling together at their bedside in prayer. Never in all the time since their marriage had she seen Ralph pray in private; and though the omission had once mildly shocked her, she now knew that he was none the worse for it.

On Sundays, with respectable regularity, they drove to Wychbury church, and listened to Mr. Pomfret's eight-minute sermons; but St. Chad's knew her no more, for, while they were away in Italy, Mr. Darnay's passion for incense had removed him to a more fragrant cure in the East End of London. Ralph welcomed the distraction of these formal religious observances, for on Sundays the men did not work, and his fury of farming improvements was such that he could not bear to see a morning of inactivity.

On Sunday afternoons they usually paid their weekly visit to Stourford, and this was the only occasion on which Clare met her mother-in-law; for Uffdown, as Ralph had cunningly calculated, was well out of the track of Lady Hingston's carriage-wheels. Her life was orientated in the direction of Wolverbury and North Bromwich, so that she had no time to spare for anything south of the hills. She had no use for the society of the Ombersleys, Abberleys or Tardebigges. She despised them as a vanquished and disintegrating race who would never re-establish themselves, and the fact that they were equally supercilious of her husband's wealth aggravated her scorn. She knew that she and her kind would laugh last and longest. Often she would talk of Clare's new visions as though she pitied her and Ralph for the surroundings that they had chosen. She would even bring herself to speak well of her hereditary rivals, the Willises at Mawne, to show her derision of Clare's "county" callers.

Aunt Cathie was more impressionable. The fact that Ralph

and Clare had cut themselves off from Stourford, and that she could visit Uffdown without the risk of encountering Lady Hingston, encouraged her to come there more often than she had expected. Two or three times a week the old victoria drew up before the steps, Aunt Cathie peering anxiously round the box to see if any other vehicle were there. It pleased and excited her to meet the county in Annabel Ombersley's drawing-room: theirs was the kind of society in which, but for the doctor's seclusion, she would always have been competent to mix. She resumed the habit of dropping her "g's," on which the doctor had always corrected her, and when she returned to the solitude of Pen House at night she would fall asleep with the fat volume of Burke's Landed Gentry on her knees. In it she would trace the intricate threads of the Miss Abberleys' collateral relationships, naïvely communicating her discoveries to Clare on her next visit, as if she had had them at her fingertips all the time.

She approved of Clare, and showed her approval by a lively and careful interest in all the domestic problems of Uffdown. Little by little she was tumbling to the realities of their financial situation, realizing that Ralph's inherited wealth entitled them to a standard of living that she had not imagined. This added to Clare's dignity in her eyes; her only anxiety was that this dignity should not be vitiated by the Stourford influence. It was proper, she admitted, that Clare should be surrounded by costly possessions, as long as their costliness was carefully concealed and deprecated in the eyes of people who had more right to them than herself.

"Yes, Clare, it's good," she would say, regarding some new purchase or present of Ralph's, "but don't you think it would be wiser to put it somewhere in the shade?"

Clare always smiled and followed her advice. Since the night

of Aunt Cathie's astonishing confession, her whole attitude toward the elder woman had changed. She had vowed to herself that never again would she be guilty of any lapse from the tenderness which she owed to her; and Aunt Cathie, too, by this one moment of completest candour, seemed to have freed herself of all the grudging repressions that had complicated her relation with Clare.

In these new days she seemed definitely older and softer, as though some irritant had been excised from her soul and left her weak and gentle like a surgical convalescent, bereft of all power of malice, charitable, and easily amused.

The change had its pathetic side. Now, for the first time in her life. Aunt Cathie had time on her hands. Since Ellen had gone to Uffdown she and Mrs. Rudge were left alone in Pen House, and her domestic duties, in spite of her passion for order and cleanliness, were not enough to keep her occupied. In the long years of devotion to the doctor's declining strength, she had lost the habit of reading; even George Eliot still remained unread; and though she had forced herself to break the old inhibition that kept her from the piano, life offered nothing but a vista of increasing loneliness in which, though she still regarded herself as a woman with the resources that the doctor approved, the only vital interest was Clare. Gallantly she set herself to conceal her desolation from Clare and from herself; but Clare was less easily deceived than she, and when, in the evening of her Uffdown visits, she saw Aunt Cathie leave the fireside with a sigh, and ask her to ring for Jabez, her conscience pricked her with so violent a pity that she stifled an impulse not only to beg Aunt Cathie to stay the night, but even to ask her to make her home at Uffdown.

She smiled at herself, when Aunt Cathie had driven off into the dusk, thinking how horrified Ralph would be at such a

proposal. And yet, in spite of the attentions which Uffdown always demanded, Clare herself was sometimes a little lonely too. It was not that Ralph's passion for her or her devotion to him had declined; rather it had reached a new phase of understanding more stable and secure than any of their Italian raptures. No shadow of disagreement had ever troubled them. Ralph was always the same, half-child, half-lover; and yet it seemed to her sometimes that he took their love for granted. A compliment, maybe; for it showed how firmly established, how unquestionable it was. But when he left her after breakfast, spurred and booted, and kissed her on the steps, he seemed to move away right out of her life. As soon as the hunting-season ended in a foam of hawthorn blossom he began to throw his restless energies into the rehabilitation of the Uffdown land. He was always, as he had protested, a farmer at heart; and though, when he returned to her with his farmer's appetite. she would try to enter into his world of crops and stock and markets and fertilizers, she knew that her interest was artificial and guessed that he saw through it.

The exacting strain of this purely physical life seemed to exhaust his energies, so that the attentions for which she still looked to him became a little perfunctory, as though her demands, if still adorable, were a nuisance. When he had finished his story he always asked her what she had been doing with herself; but when she told him, her tale seemed hardly worth the telling, and it was no surprise to her when he scarcely listened.

After dinner he would sit nodding in front of the drawingroom fire, and she would play to him on Eleanor's Bechstein as she had played on the little silk-pleated Broadwood at Pen House. When she paused between the pieces he would collect himself and thank her. "That's a jolly thing," he would say. "I wish you would play it again."

But she knew that, in point of fact, he didn't know one thing from another; and though she repeated it dutifully, and tried to persuade herself that she was playing to him with all the concentration of which her soul was capable, the music, as it left her fingers, seemed to lose itself in an unreceptive emptiness. Never, in all those evenings, could she recapture the mystical jubilation of a final act of self-expression which had overwhelmed her so often when he lay and listened to her at Pen House. The walls of Annabel Ombersley's room regarded her innocence with gentle, half-critical amusement. And so she would close the piano finally and go to seek the missing ecstasy in Ralph's arms.

He gathered her to him sleepily; this, so it seemed was an expression of love more easily comprehensible; his hands passed drowsily over her shoulders, her breast, her body, as though of themselves they were verifying and appraising the shapes of beauty that they knew. With her face pressed close to his she could hear his heart-beats quickening beneath the calm, contented rhythm of his breath. She loved him so dearly that she was angry with herself for wondering what she had lost.

3

DR. BOYD

THE new doctor drove up from Wychbury in a gig with bright yellow wheels. He was flattered to call at Uffdown, and adjusted his tie as the trap swung round the curve of the drive; for the Rentons had not been patients of his, and this

was a substantial house to be added to his list. Aunt Cathie, who had been present at the discussion of which this visit was the result, had been horrified at the idea of calling him; for he had succeeded her father as the principal practitioner in Wychbury, and everybody knew, so she said, that since the doctor's retirement the poor people had perished like flies. But Ralph had met Dr. Boyd in the hunting-field; he had seen that he rode straight, though ill-mounted; he had watched him put up a fractured thigh with a gate-bar, and though he knew nothing about surgery, he had liked the fellow's style and the clean way he set about it. He over-ruled Aunt Cathie and scribbled a note to Boyd, asking him to make a point of calling at the Manor on his round next day.

Ralph hung about the house all morning, waiting to receive him. Clare, as Aunt Cathie had instructed, stayed in bed. It seemed rather ridiculous to her to lie in like this on a soft May morning, the first that had smelt of summer, when she had never felt better in her life; but Aunt Cathie's decision was adamantine, and Ralph, who had been bothering her to consult a doctor for weeks, had determined to see the matter through.

At last Dr. Boyd entered the bedroom. He was a little man, with thin sandy hair, a neat figure, and very keen, blue eyes under his bushy eyebrows. Even though they were keen his eyes were always smiling. Clare liked them for the humorous challenge that they flung at lay indefiniteness. He sat beside the bed, and began to question her shrewdly. His speech had a faint, persuasive Irish broque that did away with her shyness and put them on easy terms. She noticed his hands, which were small, broad, firm, and of the shiny redness which constant antiseptic scrubbings give. Aunt Cathie, who had made the journey on purpose, stood staring out of the window in disapproval, ready to protect her niece from any modern enormity. The interview

was more embarrassing to her in her spinsterhood than to Clare; but she had determined to behave in a manner worthy of Dr. Weir's memory.

"Well, well, that's all very excellent," said Dr. Boyd at last. "Everything's just as right and normal as it can be. I don't expect you'll want to see me again for a long time; but just in a friendly way, I'll give you a look up now and then. I'm leaving you in good hands. Miss Weir will look after you."

Aunt Cathie, who wasn't quite certain how to take the compliment, led him seriously downstairs. Ralph, a little pale and agitated, stood waiting for them in the hall.

"You've not been long," he said, as though he were not sure that so short a consultation could be effective.

The doctor laughed. "Let's hope the whole affair will be as speedy. Don't worry yourself, Hingston. Everything's going on first-rate. Couldn't be better."

"When will it be?"

"We'll say the first week in November. No need to think about it yet."

Aunt Cathie was thirsting for a definite regimen and a sixounce bottle of medicine.

"For heaven's sake, don't turn your niece into an invalid," the doctor told her. "This is a normal physiological process. What she wants is an ordinary life. Plenty of exercise. Not violent, naturally. As I've said before, think no more about it, and when the time comes leave her to me. She's a splendidly healthy young woman, and in these matters youth is everything."

He hurried away. By this time Ralph was in the best of spirits; but to Aunt Cathie the world was full of indefinite threats of danger. From that day forward she watched Clare with uneasy eyes. She was so used to anxiety that this new one

filled something of a gap in her life; but at times Clare found it hard to bear with her seriousness.

"My dear Aunt Cathie," she said. "Anyone 'ld think that you were going to have this baby, not me."

And then she was sorry that she had spoken; she knew the meaning of that quick flush on Aunt Cathie's cheeks.

But she would not let them make an invalid of her. In this, at least, she stood firmly on Dr. Boyd's advice in spite of Aunt Cathie's gloomy assertion that these modern doctors left everything to chance. It was easy enough to persuade Ralph to her way of thinking. Aunt Cathie could not shake his faith in so excellent a sportsman as Dr. Boyd, and when once he had overcome his first vague dread of this experience so unimaginable to a man he was eager to expel it from his thoughts, and impatient that a lot of old women—that was how he described Aunt Cathie and the inevitable Mrs. Rudge, who had never missed any opportunity of being in at death or birth-should shadow the happy prospect with boding faces. He was so pleased and proud. A little too naïvely pleased, Clare sometimes thought, for he seemed to give himself credit for the whole affair, which may have been natural, but was hardly just, seeing that she had to bear its inconvenience.

And yet she could not grudge him his triumph; for one effect of her condition had been to bring about a passionate renewal of his delight in her that was almost comparable to the raptures of their early days in Italy. Now, when he parted from her in the morning, she no longer felt that he was passing away into another world. She knew that his interest was centred in her and her precious burden. When he came in tired from the fields, his eyes no longer disregarded her, but watched her with solicitude. He could not be happy unless she were in his sight; he was always eager to save her exertion or dis-

turbance, anxious to show, by small considerations and tendernesses, how dear she was to him. And this new kindness of his aroused in her an answering emotion of gratitude so different from any that she had felt toward him before, an emotion so warm, serene and satisfying that, even if their passion faded, as someday it might fade, she believed she could be content.

At least she had no lack of counsellors. Aunt Cathie had been first in the field; but as soon as the news reached Stourford, Lady Hingston swooped upon the scene. Her interest was very much to the point; for though Eleanor had already done her duty and was now doing it again, the succession to Sir Joseph's baronetcy must be assured at least three deep before she could be satisfied. She made it clear that the responsibility was entirely Clare's: but that the fruits of it were her own exclusive property. She even attempted to sweep Clare back to Stourford in order that everything might be accomplished under her eyes. Uffdown, she declared, was damp and abominably isolated; this Irish doctor, whom Ralph had picked up in the hunting-field, was a dangerous, unknown quantity; the Uffdown servants, and particularly the awkward Ellen who had gaped at her on the doorstep, were barbarous and untrained; no woman entrusted with the privilege of producing a possible heir to the Hingston title should be left to the chances of such haphazard surroundings; and, worst of all, in the shadowy gardens of Uffdown, she had caught a glimpse of Aunt Cathie.

"If you allow that woman to hang round you, Clare," she said, "something is positively certain to go wrong. I warn you."

Clare smiled. The thought of the innocent Aunt Cathie being invested with such sinister powers was amusing.

"You don't know her," she said, "and you've no idea what a help she's been to me. After all, you mustn't forget that she's looked after me nearly all my life." Lady Hingston snorted. As if that had anything to do with the birth of her grandchild.

"She's an old maid," she said, "and that's quite enough to condemn her. They know nothing about these matters, and pretend that they know everything. Do you realize that you haven't a single married woman in the house, or even within reach? Don't tell me I don't know her. I know them all; and I can tell you beforehand that she'll fuss you to death when the time comes. If you came over to Stourford, where we've every possible convenience, you could be certain of being properly looked after by experienced people. Here there's no knowing what mad foolishness you mayn't . . ."

The sentence stopped for want of a word. Not even French could help her out of her difficulty. At that moment Aunt Cathie wandered into the room. Lady Hingston's eyes blazed with instinctive anger. They recoiled from each other sideways like two unfriendly cats. Aunt Cathie was the first to recover herself. Had not she taken tea in that very room with the Miss Abberleys? And who might Lady Hingston be?

"Good afternoon," she said, thereby committing her first offence; for Lady Hingston was fond of the sound of her own name, particularly the first half of it. "We don't often have the pleasure of seeing you. How do you think Clare's looking?"

That "we" incensed Lady Hingston with its proprietary assumption. Clare lay between them like a disputed bone.

"I think Clare's looking as well as can be expected," she said; "but I'm just telling her that Uffdown is no place for her at the present moment. I'm telling her that she has no experienced person in the house in case of an emergency."

Aunt Cathie smiled. "Clare's very near to Wychbury, after all," she said, "and I am able to give her a good deal of my time."

"Well, that is very nice for her, no doubt," said Lady Hingston, controlling her natural impulse to say: "Oh, you!" In spite of the slight she managed to put into her answer she felt that Aunt Cathie had forced her into an awkward position, and hurriedly retreated to her second line.

"But even so," she went on, persuasively, "you must admit, Miss Weir, that Uffdown isn't a convenient place."

"The Ombersleys," said Aunt Cathie, "apparently found it satisfactory for nearly two hundred years. Miss Betty Ombersley assures me that it has always had a healthy reputation."

She knew that she shouldn't have mentioned the Ombersleys' name, but the consciousness of her recent social triumphs was too strong for her. Lady Hingston swooped upon it quickly.

"The Ombersleys," she sniffed. "Is that tiresome old woman still alive? She must be the only one of the family left, if that says anything for the healthiness of Uffdown. The Rentons, I know, declared that it was damp. That's why they left it."

"The Rentons?" Aunt Cathie repeated. "Oh, yes, those brass manufacturers from North Bromwich. I didn't call on them." She was still smarting from Lady Hingston's reflections on her august acquaintance. "But really I've never known Clare better," she went on hurriedly, to evade the possibility of another swoop. "You must remember that I've had every opportunity of understanding her constitution, having reared her from a child."

Again Lady Hingston retired, but only for a moment.

"Clare tells me," she said, "that you have called in this new doctor from Wychbury. I confess that I know nothing of him." It was equivalent to saying that, in that case, he couldn't be any good; and this new assault was awkward for Aunt Cathie, since she herself had been doubtful of Dr.

Boyd, as Clare, whose eyes were fixed on her in amused suspension, knew.

"We've been told," she said, "that Dr. Boyd is very clever in these cases. As a matter of fact, I didn't send for him; he was Ralph's choice. Of course, he was Dr. Weir's successor in Wychbury."

She spoke as if that, in itself, were a sufficient ground for the confidence that she didn't feel. Lady Hingston was quick to seize her advantage and throw Ralph to the winds.

"I think," she said, "that my son was most precipitate in acting without advice in a matter of this kind. Ralph is only a boy. No responsible person should have allowed him to do so. That is my point, Miss Weir. If Ralph is permitted to do perfectly wild things like that at this stage, Heaven only knows how we shall finish. Do you see what I mean?"

"Perfectly," Aunt Cathie replied. "But, after all, Ralph is Clare's husband, and the baby, when it comes, will be his."

"No it won't, it's mine, it's mine, it's Wolverbury's!" Lady Hingston's mind screamed. She said:

"We have to remember, in this case, that the baby may be a very important person."

"Naturally," Aunt Cathie smiled smoothly, disregarding all that she knew Lady Hingston implied, "a first baby always is, isn't it? Particularly, in our case, when the baby is dear Clare's. I always think of myself just as if I were her mother, you know. Clare darling, don't you think I'd better ring for some tea?"

"Thank you, I don't want any," Lady Hingston snapped. But Aunt Cathie rang all the same; the act was equivalent to throwing up new entrenchments under her enemy's eyes. It showed the visitor how very much at home she was, and revenged in one blow the humiliations that Stourford had inflicted on her.

Lady Hingston would not retreat without a final demonstration.

"Before I go," she said, "I should like to have this matter settled. In my opinion Uffdown is unsuitable. If Ralph were here, I'm sure he'd agree with every word I say."

"What a pity!" said Aunt Cathie, "he never comes in till it's dark. If you could wait another hour . . ."

"I can't wait," said Lady Hingston, irritably. "We have a dinner-party this evening. You'd better tell him when he comes in, Clare, that I want to talk to him about this. He keeps away from Stourford for months at a time; I can never get hold of him in these days. Now, don't forget!"

"I'll tell him, mother," said Clare. The word gave a stab to Aunt Cathie's heart. "But I know quite well," she continued, "that he won't want me to go to Stourford, and even if he did, you know, I shouldn't go."

"Really, Clare," Lady Hingston began.

"I wish you could understand, dear," Clare went on quickly, "that I'm absolutely happy where I am. It's my home, you see, and Stourford . . . Well, Stourford isn't. And please don't worry yourself about Dr. Boyd either. I like him most awfully; he's such a reassuring, friendly person."

"You know nothing about him, absolutely nothing," said Lady Hingston. "Except," she added, "that he was Dr. Weir's successor."

"That was extremely rude of her," Aunt Cathie said, when Lady Hingston had gone, "to drag in the doctor's name."

"You asked for it, my dearest," Clare told her, laughing, "you really did."

LOVE IS ENOUGH

"I found it difficult to defend Dr. Boyd," Aunt Cathie admitted, "but when that woman attacked him it seemed the least I could do."

"You're each of you as bad as the other," Clare said.

"I hope, at least," Aunt Cathie murmured anxiously, "that I did not say anything as unladylike as that."

Clare laughed again. She knew that it was impossible to make Aunt Cathie see the joke. That was the worst of them all, their solemn intensity. To taste the humour of the situation was a prerogative of youth. She often regretted that Ralph was a little heavy on the hand at times. Luckily his mother's proposal to transfer her to Stourford threw him into furious opposition.

"When I do see mother, I'll damned well tell her what I think of her," he said.

"You won't do anything of the sort, my darling," Clare assured him. "It'd be waste of time. She's quite clever enough to know what you think of her already. She can't help acting on violent impulses, but all the bees in her bonnet go buzzing away sooner or later. I believe I understand her far better than you do. She'll have forgotten all about it by this time. Oh, Ralph, I wish to goodness all of you wouldn't treat me with this ghastly seriousness. It makes me think about myself all the time, and I don't want to!"

4

TEMESIDE

SHE was determined not to think about herself, and yet, as May days lengthened into June and midsummer passed, there

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were too many reminders to let her forget. Ralph was getting more impatient as the time went on; he was always in a hurry about everything; his anxiety made him stand about so helplessly that Clare, out of sheer charity, was forced to urge him to leave her, to play tennis at Stourford or cricket at Wychbury; and though he protested that he didn't want to, he was really glad of the excuse, for his fine muscles grew lax by keeping pace with her limited activity; there was no hunting to shake his liver into order or black thoughts out of his mind.

Only when the havmaking began at the beginning of July, for the year was late, did he find a real justification for his existence. Through those long days he laboured early and late, and slouched in at night, dog-tired, the fair skin of arms and neck and face burned to a fierce brick-red; and, though she did not like to admit it. Clare was glad of his absence, for it gave her a chance to abandon the game of pretending to be her old self.

Those summer days at Uffdown were very sweet to her. She would sit for hours with her work under the shade of the last cedar, within range of the rosemary hedge that smelt of Capri, listening to the clatter of Ralph's mowing machine away in the fields, letting the peace of that old house and garden, to which the high light of summer gave a golden bloom, sink into her body through every sensual channel. There she would sit and sew, breathing the scent of hay, listening to the hushed voices of thrushes somnolent as her thoughts, to the unceasing bourdon of bees in the flowered borders. She herself was so drugged with summer pollens that she was content to dream in her warm garden like a bee in the heart of a flower.

At tea-time Ellen would bring her a plate of Uffdown strawberries that were an essence of summer's fragrance; then she would sew again, till the rooks came flapping home, and midges, turning the low sunlight into a golden haze, compelled her to take shelter in the house.

Sometimes, when she was sitting out in the garden alone, the fear that she had determined to banish from her mind seized her suddenly; it carried with it a moment of silence, in which the muted birdsong, the multitudinous murmurs of the summer day, were blankly suspended, as though the whole world had caught its breath with hers; and so she would pick her work up hurriedly and fly to the refuge of Annabel's drawing-room, where Eleanor's piano stood by the window facing west. There she would sit and play for an hour at a time; it did not matter what she played so long as music filled her ears, and so, for the most part, she chose the tempestuous sonatas of Beethoven, and Fugues of Bach in whose sonorous intricacies she might lose herself.

She could not always lose herself; but even when her thoughts moved against music like a toneless counterpoint, she was comforted, and happier, somehow, than when she was playing to Ralph. For when Ralph listened to her, or pretended to listen, her mind was always divided between the music and him. She always hoped that Steven-the baby must be a boy, and Steven was his name-would share this intimate part of her, so that from the music that she had given to him she would be able to extract the particular sympathy that she lacked in Ralph. She had a fancy that when she played to herself like this she was making sure of the desired inheritance. He shall have music wherever he goes, she told herself; all his life should be surrounded by things that to her were beautiful, and not least the beauty of Uffdown, which absorbed her every day more intimately, as though it had finally made up its mind about her and accepted her; the beauty from which Lady

Hingston, in her misguided enthusiasm, would have snatched her away.

Ralph disapproved of these long piano recitals. More than once he had found her sitting at the piano with a white face and eyes that burned with a light that he took for tiredness.

"That's what you do when I leave you," he would say. "The trouble with you is that when once you get stuck at this blessed piano you don't know when to stop. You'd be better at Stourford, where they keep it locked. Beethoven, too. You know, you've no business to play that gloomy stuff. It's enough to give anyone the blues."

He scolded her, and yet he was kind, so kind. Ardently as she adored him, she could never have believed him capable of the angelic patience and unselfishness that he showed her in those days. Aunt Cathie was kind enough and patient in her way, but, when she came to compare them, her gentleness was nothing beside that of Ralph. In Aunt Cathie's company she was never wholly immune from fear; in Ralph's the word had no meaning for her.

As summer passed, her hunger for Ralph's presence grew more acute. She dreaded the first cubbing days that would take him further afield. Now she no longer sent him away from her. She could not bear to be separated from him. She was most happy at night, when she could snuggle up to him and feel the physical support of his robust body against her own. Wherever he went, if it were not too far for her, she insisted on going with him. It was as though she felt it necessary that he should take his part in their joint adventure.

One evening he came back to Uffdown from a directors' meeting at the Wolverbury works. Even though he was no longer active in the business, Sir Joseph had insisted on keep-

ing him on the directorate.

"I met Lord Arthur Powys," he told her. "The poor chap was as bored as I was. He's a keen fisherman, you know, and the grayling are rising like mad in his water on Teme. He wanted me to go over for a day"—Clare's heart sank suddenly—"but of course I told him that I couldn't."

"Oh, Ralph darling," she said, "I think it's simply beastly, the way you have to give up everything for me."

"Only another month," he told her, "and then we'll kick out again like anything. By the way, I've heard from Harley of a mare that'll suit you. You've got to hunt next season, don't forget that."

She snuggled up to him like a kitten.

"I want to do everything that you do," she said. "About this fishing. The Teme isn't so very far away, is it? Why shouldn't I go with you and sit on the bank and watch?"

He laughed. "You talk as if you thought I was going to fish for roach in a canal, with half a gallon of beer in a basket. Fly-fishing, my child, is a strenuous business; there's over a mile of water to cover."

"Still, even if I didn't see you, I could sit on the bank," she said. "I should hate myself if you missed going, Ralph."

"No risks at the last moment, my dear."

"But if Dr. Boyd said I could go?" she persisted.

And in the end he allowed her to persuade him into sending a note to Wychbury. "Certainly," the doctor wrote, "as long as you take it gently, and don't play tricks. I've told you before she's not an invalid."

Aunt Cathie heard the news with horror. It confirmed her deepest distrust of Dr. Boyd's competence; the very idea was monstrous and unthinkable. But Clare was determined that all Ralph's opportunities should not be spoiled. "Then let him go alone," said Aunt Cathie. "You needn't feel lonely; I'll come

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and spend the day with you." "I want to go with him," Clare told her. "I'm tired of being in one place. I want to see something new and think of something different." She was so obdurate that Aunt Cathie, for one moment, thought of calling her enemy, Lady Hingston, to her aid. She saw that even this sacrifice of pride would not avail her, and Ralph was useless. "It's better," he said, "to let her have her way. You can trust me. I'll take good care of her."

Aunt Cathie retired to Pen House in a huff, washing her hands of Dr. Boyd and the pair of them.

The day dawned, peerless and sparkling with such a brilliance as only September can show. Ralph was out at the window early. The sight of the dew-frosted lawn filled him with excitement. "It couldn't be better," he told her. "This nip in the air is just what grayling like. If the sky keeps clear and the sun warms the shallows, they'll come up like anything."

Clare smiled at him out of her cosiness as he moved about the room collecting the casts that he had put in to soak overnight. In any matter of sport the gay keenness of his anticipation was like that of a pointer released on a shooting morning; like a pointer he sniffed the favourable air, and darted here and there with restless movements.

They drove down gently to Wychbury station. The sun had risen; the little platform smelt clean and dewy. Mr. Hemus was there in his shirt-sleeves and begged her to accept one of his prize chrysanthemums; the great flower was a ridiculous encumbrance, but Clare knew that he could not have paid her a higher compliment. It pleased her to think how all these railway people deferred to Ralph. In a compartment permeated by the chrysanthemum's autumnal odour they travelled to Stourton junction and changed. From her seat on the long platform Clare could see the long lines of china baths, set up on

end like gravestones, which had impressed her on the day of the doctor's funeral, a hundred years ago.

Her thoughts were all her own; for Ralph was intent on his fly-book, picking out the delicate "green insects," and "red" and "orange tags" that he was going to fish with. They crossed the Severn at Bewdley. The stream ran low and clear after a fortnight of drought. "Better and better," Ralph told her.

Once beyond the Severn the character of the country changed. Now they ran northward through the fringe of the Wyre Forest, an immense wood of stunted oak-trees already tarnished by autumn, and hugged the knees of Clee. Clare had never been so far west of Severn before; she had only seen this mysterious Marchland from Uffdown, as a jumble of blue hills melting into the mountains of Wales; and now she found them curiously familiar, like the landscape of a recurrent dream, familiar and vaguely exciting, as though they had existed already in her consciousness. Their rediscovery made her tremulously happy. She could not say why, until she reflected that with every moment the train was carrying her nearer to those hills and that white river from which her life had sprung, the mountains of Radnor and the impetuous Claerwen.

Ralph, having finished fiddling with his flies, grew more impatient than ever. He caught her in the midst of her dreams and wondered why she was silent.

"You're not feeling seedy?" he asked her anxiously. "This branch-line goes so slowly. That's Tenbury Church, the tower in the trees beyond the river. In another five minutes we'll be there."

They dismounted alone at an empty wayside platform, and when Ralph had hoisted their luggage on to his back they set off slowly in the direction of the Teme. Too slowly for Ralph; he was so eager now that in spite of all restraint he continually

outpaced her. The air hung heavy in the river valley; for although the sky was as clear as Ralph had prophesied, a bank of mist, ebbing slowly southward, still obscured the sun, and in it a layer of imprisoned land-scents surrounded them; the odour of trellised hop-yards, from which the sleepy clusters had been stripped, of field-fires, trailing blue smoke over the misty levels, of pungent, minty savours, rising from ditches and depressions that flood-water had fertilized. The cowls of red-brick oast-houses all pointed southward down the river; but there was no wind to fill them with its draught.

On the edge of the hop-yards they flushed a covey of partridges from the plough. Ralph's arms twitched upward automatically, as though he were carrying not a rod but a gun. The covey disappeared, low-flying, over a spinney of alders, lining the river bank and standing still and black against red cliffs beyond the stream. Their sharpened senses sniffed the smoke of a stick-fire and an appetizing odour of frizzling bacon that rose from an encampment of Lancashire cloggers who had knocked off work for breakfast; a little group of stunted, weather-beaten men, who called to them in flat North-country accents and wished them good luck as they passed.

"Good luck be hanged!" Ralph grumbled. "Those fellows are double-dyed poachers, every one of them. I don't mind betting they've been worming for trout already this morning and made a mess of the water. I'd better start half a mile lower down, and fish up-stream to you. You needn't fag yourself by walking down with me. I don't suppose they'll interfere with you, and if you should want me, you could send a message by one of them."

He knelt on the grass and began to assemble his rod, taking the lengths of polished greenheart out of their case. The snug stoppers came from the suction-joints like corks from a well-

fitting pop-gun. All Ralph's fishing-gear seemed as clean and springily efficient as himself; Clare liked the texture of his shining casts, the smooth, greased, silken line, the rod, that was so delicate that it trembled with life as he raised it to his shoulder. He kissed her and left her sitting on the green bank. The cloggers, their breakfast over, moved past without a word.

She was alone, and very happy. She sat there thinking of untroubled things, glad of the inspiration that had taken her away from Uffdown. Possibly this was the last day on which she would be able to leave home for many months. It would have been a pity to have missed this opportunity of rearranging her thoughts, which too familiar surroundings had accustomed to one groove; above all in a solitude so sweet as this.

For it was strangely quiet. The impacts of the cloggers' axes, splitting wood, only seemed to emphasize its quietude. The stillness of the riverside was like that of night, but far more kindly. It was only when it had sunk into her mind and calmed it that she became aware of the fact that this silence floated. detached, above Teme's ceaseless watery murmur, and that the stillness, in fact, was made up of innumerable shy movements; of leaves that were shed upon the stream's hurrying surface; of dippers that bobbed their white breasts upon rocky ledges and flew like shadows up-stream; of anxious moorhens that clucked among the roots of alder and watched their chickens swimming in black procession at the water's edge. Sometimes a blackbird left the humid hawthorns and shot across the river with a stutter of alarm; and once Clare's eyes were dazzled by a travelling flame of blue that was the body of a kingfisher burning through his flutter of dark wings.

Lulled by the influence of sounds as smooth as silence and movements so gentle that they suggested immobility, she must have fallen asleep; for when her senses returned Ralph was standing over her, his face flushed with the exertion of walking in waders, and, in his eyes, a light of happiness that she had not often seen of late. His bag bulged with the capture of three grayling. He turned them out proudly on the grass beside her, and showed her their silver-mottled bodies and the great dorsal fins.

"Smell them," he said. "They're supposed to smell like thyme; but I think cucumber is nearer to it. I'd have had some more, but the beggars are rising short. Lord Arthur said the same. There's a splendid hatch of fly out on the water, and I'm dying for lunch."

Clare, too, was hungry. They ate their sandwiches greedily; for Ralph had been so intent on his short-rises that it was already afternoon. Never had they made such a jolly careless meal together since the days of their mountain picnics under the crags of Capri; but when they had finished not even his after-lunch pipe could keep Ralph longer from the water.

"I want to fish the slides below the weir," he told her. "The water shallows to a ford, under these cliffs, and if I don't get a basket there I shall be surprised. I shan't move much, so you had better come and watch me."

He lifted her gently from the grass and carried her waterproofs to the edge of a high bank, where sandstone cliffs and a hanger of beeches shadowed a pool into which white water came roaring over the glassy rim of the weir. The water drummed and thundered so loudly that they could scarcely hear each other speak.

"The river's risen a good three inches in the last hour," he told her. "It must have been raining in earnest somewhere up in Wales. That's the worst of this stream, always subject to flood."

He scrambled down the bank and waded through the tail

of the shallows. She watched his skill happily. The rod was a tapered extension of his strong hands; it switched in the air; the line slid out straight before him on the water's swiftly sliding surface, the fly fell like thistledown above the dimple of a fish. She saw a swirl of silver. His lips framed the words: "They're rising short again"; but though he was shouting, the weir deadened his voice.

As she watched him the fascination of his frustrated skill began to engross her; partly that, and partly the predatory instinct of a human animal fired by the zest of hunting; for now he had become an incarnation of her own will and his quarry was hers. Slowly he waded against the current, casting always as he went. In the black pool a big fish rose, head and tail; she saw it stretched in a silver bow, but Ralph, intent on his fly, could see nothing but the widening circle of its fall. She trembled with excitement, and cried, and pointed. He nodded back to her, and moved cautiously forward. All her desire was concentrated on the capture of that leaping, gleaming crescent. The emotion was savage and sweet.

So he crept forward; the cast was still too long for him. He felt the bottom cautiously with his nailed brogues, now rising, now sinking thigh-deep, as he followed the uncertainties of the rocky ledges. Once, stepping forward warily, he drew back and changed his direction. She marvelled at his restraint in that exciting moment; it showed her the alertness of his well-poised brain. At last he reached a point where he could go no further. He cast again and again, letting out line, and with every cast the fly that he switched backward would have fallen nearer to the spot from which the agitation of the rise had disappeared. At last he let it drop. Clare held her breath. It could not have been neater. The glassy surface dimpled; the reel screamed; the upright rod stretched to a lovely curve.

CLARE HINGSTON 20

He smiled and shouted back to her: "I'm in him: a big one; I think it's a trout."

She watched the contest breathlessly. Thrice his rod-point dipped as the fish left the water, then rose again as the singing reel measured a furious downward rush into the depths of the pool. Gradually the tension of the rod began to tell. She saw Ralph warily reaching for the clip that held his landing-net. He drew his prey gently towards him, the net outstretched. He moved his feet a little to be surer of balance; and the movement filled Clare with such fear of the depths beneath him that a cry came to her lips: "Be careful, darling, be careful!" she cried. Her voice seemed thin and feeble. He did not hear her, her alarm increased to a panic that compelled her to get on to her feet and scramble down the bank. Somehow or other she must make him hear.

"Ralph, Ralph, be careful. It's deep!" she called again and again.

Suddenly, through the roaring of the weir and his own preoccupation, he heard her voice. He turned his head and saw her shouting to him, and all thought of the hooked fish suddenly left his brain; for he imagined that she must be in trouble. He turned and hurried to reach her, and in that moment his caution forsook him. Agonized, she watched him make the false step that she had dreaded. He went in backward, with hands stretched behind him. His waders, swollen with water, pulled him down into a twelve-foot channel cleft between the rocks. The current seized him and dragged him down. Clare saw his smashed rod and tweed hat swirled away; but Ralph himself had disappeared beneath a glassy blackness. Paralyzed with terror she stared at the unbroken, rapid surface; then, as the power of thought swiftly returned, she found that she herself was wading out into cold water, driven by some mad, uncertain aim. It wouldn't matter if she, too, were carried away; she had lost him, lost him, and, with him, everything. Still, she was crying aloud, and still the roaring weir deadened her cries.

Then, twenty yards below her, a black arm emerged, clutching at an unseen ledge. It clutched and disappeared. She followed downstream, blindly. The current contemptuously caught her legs from under her and tossed her headlong into a gravelled shallow. The chill of the water made her gasp for breath. This was the end, she thought. But even as she surrendered hope, she saw the bulk of Ralph's body lifting and clinging to the lower edge of the shoal that had received her, and a moment later he was stooping over her and helping her to her feet. For the moment there was nothing but frustration in his mind; his face was white and ugly.

"What is the matter?" he spluttered. "Nothing? Then why, in God's name, did you put me off like that? You might have done for both of us. This river's full of dangers."

"I know, I know," she sobbed. "I took fright. I was shouting to you to be careful."

"Careful!" he panted. "Careful!" Then suddenly he burst out laughing and gathered her in his wet arms. "You poor darling, you poor darling!" he said. "But even if I'd been drowned, you needn't have drenched yourself like this. What can I do with you?"

"Oh, don't, Ralph, don't!" she cried. She did not know what she was saying. In that extreme of thankfulness and reaction from fear she might just as well have been drowned herself, she had simply ceased to exist.

He supported her to the bank. His own balance was still uncertain, his movements elephantine, for his waders were full to the brim of leaden water. He made her settle down on the bank while he stripped them from his legs. She lay there as quiet as a child, sobbing softly to herself. He came and lay beside her and kissed her; she had never seemed to him so helpless and pitiful as then, with the wet skirt clinging to her body.

"It's all right for me," he said, "it's you I'm thinking of. What a hopeless pair of fools. That rod's gone to glory all right. Clare, my sweet, you're shivering. We mustn't stay here any longer in the open. There's a hotel at Tenbury, but that's too far for you to walk. I think we'd better make for the stationmaster's cottage and keep warm there till the next train."

The sun was already sinking behind the beeches that hung to the red cliffs above the pool; once more the mist, which had dissolved at midday, invested the ploughland, and trailed among the trellises of the hop-yard. They trudged heavily back to the station. Ralph knocked at the cottage door, and the stationmaster's wife, a spare and acid woman, surveyed Clare's soaked, ungainly figure with suspicion.

"We've had an accident," Ralph told her, and the name of Lord Arthur worked such wonders that in half an hour they were drinking a hot sweet infusion of tannin in front of a crackling fire. By this time Clare had recovered from her fright. Clad in the Sunday garments of the stationmaster and his wife, they huddled close to the fire, waiting for their own clothes to dry and for the evening train to come puffing down from Woofferton, laughing at the strangeness of their adventure and the cold douche with which it had ended.

The train was cold, comfortless and appallingly slow; it seemed to Clare as if the journey would never end; her limbs were chilled and heavy, as if they did not belong to her. On the platform at Stourford they had to run to catch the Wychbury connection, and as Clare dragged behind, she was seized by a sudden gasping pain, different from any that she had felt

before. She told herself that it was nothing, that the ducking had given her a cold; but as soon as they had settled, panting, into their compartment, it came again, catching her breath so sharply that she was forced to cry out.

"What's that?" Ralph asked in quick alarm. "What's that?"
"Nothing," she assured him, "just a stitch in my side; we had
to run so."

But now he was alarmed, and when the pain came again he saw her features shrunken and contorted, so that she was bound to confess what she feared; what, in her heart, she knew.

"Good Lord," he said, "our luck's out completely. As soon as we get to Wychbury, we'll drive straight to Dr. Boyd's."

"I'd rather go straight home," she told him. She was now so cold and frightened that she felt she could not control herself away from the friendliness of Uffdown. She was like a stricken rat hurrying to its hole; but Ralph was so persistent that she allowed him to drive her to the doctor's house.

A fool of a maid opened to them; the doctor was out on a country call; she could not say when he would be in. Clare heard the announcement pitifully from the interior of the brougham. It seemed to rob her of her last hope; for ever since they had left Stourton her mind had been concentrating itself on Dr. Boyd as the solution of all her distress. Ralph came back to her rattled and distracted; she was thankful that it was too dark for him to see her face; she tried to modulate her voice in such a way that he would imagine that she was at ease.

"I'm going to leave you," he said. "Bissell will drive you home as quickly as possible. I shall send up a trap from the Royal Oak to fetch Aunt Cathie. Then I shall set off as fast as I can to intercept Boyd. He's gone to one of the farms below Bromsley. You won't mind my leaving you, my darling?"

She told him that she would not mind. She was thankful, in fact, that he would no longer be able to see or hear her. She wanted to be alone, and, above all, to reach her home at Uffdown. When Bissell had touched up his horses and the darkness of night received her, she felt an extraordinary sense of relief.

It was more than two hours later when Ralph returned to Uffdown in Dr. Boyd's gig. He had found Boyd just as he was leaving the farmyard at Lower Bromsley, and implored him to come at once. The doctor took his summons as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, and listened without surprise or emotion to Ralph's story of their riverside disaster. "A bit of rough luck," he called it.

"We'd better drive along at once," he said, "and see if there's anything doing. Just jump up here beside me. That's the style!"

But when Ralph had mounted the gig he went on talking to the farmer about his patient as though Uffdown and Clare were minor interests in his practice.

"For God's sake hurry up!" Ralph begged him; but the pace at which Boyd drove was as leisurely as one of the ponderous processes of nature. He smiled at Ralph's impetuousness, evaded his eager questions, and let the tired horse go as it would over the hilly road that led them towards Uffdown. In the intervals between his cases he refused to let people treat him as a medical man. He talked of the Woodland Stourton's last day in Brimsley Bottom.

"You're far too grand for us in these days, Hingston," he said. "Personally I much prefer this country to the Worcestershire's. If I were as well-mounted as you are I might change my mind. As a matter of fact, I like a hunt that's run by farmers; there's a naturalness and good-fellowship about it that

you never get with the big packs. What's more, the truth of the matter is I can't afford capping. Let's see, now, which road's the better?"

"Keep to the right," Ralph answered grimly. "I can't stand this much longer."

"You won't have to, my boy," the doctor told him. "As a matter of fact, we've been going like the devil. I'm looking forward to seeing your wife out with us this winter. What about that mare of Bostock's that you were speaking of? She's a neat little thing; his daughter rode her last week, and I liked the look of her. Steady now, you brute! Don't get excited!"

The words, which were addressed to his horse, were equally applicable to Ralph, for as the doctor spoke them they had swung into the Uffdown drive. Ralph jumped down before the trap had stopped. Ellen had opened the door to receive him, her face all white and pulpy with emotion. She burst into a torrent of speech:

"Oh, sir, thank Heaven, you've come, sir. Yes, sir, the mistress is upstairs. Miss Cathie and Thirza Rudge and Mrs. Harbord are along with her; they come about an hour ago, and told me to wait down here and let you in, sir, and take the doctor's coat, sir."

But Dr. Boyd had already performed this office for himself and had passed to the foot of the stairs.

"Now, Hingston, keep your pecker up!" he smiled as he disappeared.

Ralph was alone with Ellen in the firelit hall. The pallor of Ellen's amorphous face was treacherous to his nerves. He could not look at her; nor could he trust himself to tell her to go, although she showed no signs of leaving him. He picked up a paper and stared at it in the firelight. The same old story: South Africa. What did he care for South Africa? Ellen stood

mute in the background. He stole a glance in her direction, hoping that she would take the hint and leave him. It had the opposite effect, emboldening her to address him, for the first time in her life, as another human being:

"Don't you take on, sir," she blurted out. "Miss Clare's a real brick, she is; she's got a good heart in her body. She'll be all right, sir, with Thirza and Mrs. Harbord. Everyone in the village says that that there Mrs. Harbord's a wonder. Oh, hark at me now! If I bain't forgetting the doctor's there too! And Miss Clare—the mistress, I ought to say . . . 'You see that the master gets his dinner, Ellen'; those was the last words she spoke to me. So, if you don't mind, sir, I think she'd feel more satisfied like if you took a bite."

Dinner... The very word was an outrage to him. It was unbearably pitiful to think that Clare, in this extremity, should have given thought to such a trivial thing; but Ellen's voice was so tremulous and persuasive that he could not treat her roughly.

"No, Ellen, I couldn't touch anything," he told her. "Bring me the whisky bottle and a syphon of soda-water."

He felt unspeakably kindly toward Ellen, this creature whom a common love and anxiety had endowed with a quality of sisterhood, and kindlier still when, having placed the tray at his elbow, she silently retired. He poured out a stiff peg of whisky, but could not drink. The old house was so subdued and silent, so callous in its accumulated knowledge of human birth and death. If he could have heard a sound he would have been contented. If he could have heard a sound, fear would have killed him. His Clare . . . his clear-white darling. . . .

There was no sound; only the comfortable whisper of the fire and embers settling easily downward. He could not contain himself much longer like this. Longer . . . Why, sometimes

this double torture lasted a night, a day and a night! "Never again," he told himself, "never again!"

Suddenly the figure of Dr. Boyd appeared at the head of the stairs. Ralph rushed to meet him. He was leisurely and smiling; he rubbed his shiny red hands.

"Is she all right?" Ralph gasped. He could not trust these smiles.

"Yes, she's all right." The doctor laughed at him. "They're both all right. It's a boy."

"My God, Boyd. My God . . . My God!"

He was laughing himself, with a high, breathless laughter. "My God . . . I can't believe it!"

"Try a spot of whisky, Hingston. Thanks, I don't mind one myself."

Ralph poured it with shaking hands; the doctor settled down with a sigh into an arm-chair. Beneath the swirl of his thoughts Ralph heard him speaking:

"You know it's an eight months' baby? Don't worry yourself; it'll live all right. Strong as a lion. Of course that made it easier. Your wife was splendid, Hingston. Between you and me—for heaven's sake, don't tell Miss Weir—she's had a first-rate time. Youth and health, you know. Well, well, that's over. I'll just have another look at her before I go. We'll get the nurse out first thing to-morrow morning; too late to-night. Oh, and there's one thing more: I'm trusting you to get those two old women out of the house, particularly Mrs. Harbord, as soon as you can. That old ghoul is a family curse in Wychbury, and yet I can't get the village people to see it." He rose from his chair. "Pack them off, Hingston, pack them off; they're like a couple of damned vultures," he repeated as he moved again to the stairs.

Ralph watched him go with his leisurely indolent satis-

faction. He gulped down whisky from the glass that he carried untasted in his hand. He knew that his mouth was smiling foolishly, triumphantly; but still his mind was incapable of consecutive thought, and still, out of its exultant emptiness, the same words kept on forming:

"My God . . . My God . . . My God!"

Oh, brave, brave world, oh, world of unimaginably sweet miracles! Oh, Clare, Clare, Clare . . .

5

STEVEN

HIS name was Steven. From the moment when first his existence was dreamed of that had been his name. He was dreadfully tiny, Clare found; his face of a dark, carnal red that resembled the colour of the terra-cotta bricks of which the new North Bromwich law-courts were built. Out of this brick-red amorphous piece of flesh, crinkled and puckered like the petals of a field-poppy that has newly burst its hispid calyx, two slits of eyes disclosed pupils of a bluish blackness. Not even Clare could have proclaimed him beautiful, and Ralph, used as he was to the sight of new-born sucklings of other species on the farm, surveyed his son with mingled awe and misgiving; for, strapped in the linen binder that Mrs. Rudge had applied, the girth of the creature's chest was hardly as great as that of his own forearm. Ralph's face, indeed, was so bewildered, yet so tactfully composed to conceal his doubts on the normality of their joint production for fear of distressing her, that Clare was forced to encourage him with a wan smile.

"He won't always look like that," she assured him. "He'll

grow out of it. Look at his nails; they haven't reached the tips of his fingers yet, poor darling. That's how they know his real age, Thirza tells me."

"As long as you're all right," he told her, "nothing else matters. Boyd says he's strong enough in any case."

"Of course he's strong, and I'm as right as can be. You should hear him cry," said Clare; and Steven, already sensitive enough to resent the rhythmical agitations which Thirza Rudge thought essential to the nursing of babies, proclaimed it in the mewling of a famished kitten. This feeble and rather disagreeable sound filled Clare with a tenderness that differed from anything which she had experienced before; it caught at her heart and filled it with a soft warmth that overflowed from there into every corner of her lacerated body and her weak, dizzy brain; and when she had persuaded Thirza to place the baby near to her, and felt the overplus of this strangely generated heat steal through her skin into the creature's grotesque body, the act of transmission filled her with a drowsy content which her numbed senses refused to accept as real. Again and again she wakened from a doze to reassure herself that the time for which she had been waiting for so many months was really over; that the baby, whom Thirza had taken from her when she fell asleep, was no dream's figment but a creature of flesh and blood; her flesh; her blood; her son; Steven. The dreaded event had been too swift and preceded by excitements too strenuous for dread. It was over; she was tired; she wanted to sleep.

Youth, as Dr. Boyd assured them, was everything. Next day, when the nurse arrived from North Bromwich, it seemed to Clare ridiculous to be treated as an invalid. She wanted to laugh at the woman's mysterious precautions and prohibitions, at the awkwardness of Ralph's stealthy approaches, his

anxious face, his hushed voice. Within half a week her natural resilience rebelled against further imprisonment. The nurse looked shocked: "Even the working classes take ten days, my dear," she said. "Ladies always a fortnight." Dr. Boyd chaffed her for her impatience, but was firm, and Ralph, taking courage from her smiles, abandoned the religious seriousness with which he had approached her bedside; for the state of maternity, which he had half dreaded as one that would separate her from him and change or age her in some undivinable way, seemed actually to have made her younger and more desirable—so tenderly, inexplicably young that, with her dark hair braided, she looked like the schoolgirl that she had been before he fell in love with her.

For hours on end, under Nurse Wilson's supervision, they played together like a pair of furtive children. In the relief of that one shadow's withdrawal they had no age; but while Ralph could think of nothing but Clare's adorableness, Clare's eyes and ears were anxious for the least sound or movement on the part of the baby, who still seemed to Ralph a grotesque and unexplained phenomenon.

Dr. Boyd, in the wisdom that lay behind his puckered, smiling eyes, had declared that Clare must nurse the baby herself, and as Steven's mealtimes came round, Ralph found that Nurse Wilson displaced him in favour of his son. They made a joke of this, as of everything else; and yet, when he saw the baby's round head nuzzled against Clare's white breast, and Clare's eyes softened to a look which she had never given to him, Ralph often felt a pang of something that was near to jealousy. It was an emotion for which he hated and despised himself; he was at pains to conceal it; but he need not have troubled himself, for at those times Clare seemed to be rapt in a kind of physical ecstasy, commingled with subtle satisfactions of soul,

protective and generous, that made her almost unaware of his presence. Sometimes he felt this estrangement so acutely that he would find some excuse to go away from her; but though Clare smiled at him, she was so absorbed that she scarcely noticed his going.

He began to grow restless and eager for the day when this absorption in the duties of maternity would be over, and he could have her to himself. He found consolation in making plans for a renewal of their life together; a life that she would be able to share with him more completely than that which the coming of the baby had complicated. Uffdown, as Lady Hingston had declared, was a remote, unfriendly spot. Unless he could be sure of Clare's companionship the life he led there must be lonely compared with that to which he had been accustomed at Stourford. She had promised that she would keep him company in the hunting-field. Already that mare of Bostock's, about which he had spoken to Dr. Boyd, was installed with Starlight and the big grey in the Uffdown stables. Maternity was all very well; but neither Clare nor anyone else need think that it was going to deprive him of his wife.

He had not long to wait; for when, at the end of the month Nurse Wilson departed, there was no lack of competition for the possession of Steven. By this time, as even Ralph was forced to admit, his son had developed into a presentable baby. He was still exceedingly tiny; but now the slit-like eyes had opened to the promise of a blue as vivid as Ralph's; the red skin had cooled to a creamy whiteness, and the unshaped features had defined themselves in a mould that Ralph was flattered into considering a copy of his own. All the world seemed as bent on establishing these tenuous likenesses as if they were essential evidences of legitimacy.

"A Hingston," his mother told him. "The child's as Hingston as he can be! He's the living image of what you were at his age. Of course you were much bigger and stronger. All my children were as healthy as they possibly could be. I never took any risks, and we always lived in dry, healthy houses, not in a damp, decayed place like this. No doubt you realize now that if Clare had taken my advice and come over to Stourford the baby would have had a better chance."

"A Hingston?" said Aunt Cathie indignantly. "Really, my dear Clare, I don't know how they have the face to say such a thing; they'll be claiming you as a Hingston next! Why, anyone with eyes in their head can see that he's the very image of the doctor. He has the doctor's nose. He's an entirely different type from you or Ralph either. Thirza noticed it the very moment he was born."

Clare smiled. It seemed cruel to her to associate this little creature, so frail, so alarmingly young, with the harsh old figure who had tyrannized Pen House, to compare the small pink dab of Steven's nose with the aquiline beak that used to thrust itself from above Dr. Weir's blue lips. She knew, in fact, that Steven was the image of Ralph. Whether that were enough to establish Lady Hingston's claim was another matter; for Ralph, as she had always told herself, resembled neither of his parents, and her baby, however they might try to bind him to the past, was really neither Weir nor Hingston, but her son, a new, miraculous creation, endowed by her with body and soul alike.

It pleased her none the less to see the way in which these other eager claimants bowed before him; for though Lady Hingston was as overbearing in her proprietary assertions as ever, always ready to be scandalized at Clare's methods of

upbringing and Dr. Boyd's modernity, Clare found her betrayed into such unimaginable tenderness in the baby's presence that she began to wonder if she had not always misjudged her. Aunt Cathie, too, was entirely transformed. She haunted Uffdown persistently. It seemed as if Pen House had given place, as the centre of her life, to Steven's nursery, a gay, white-panelled chamber on the first floor, facing south. There she would sit, hour after hour, silent in an anxious adoration, more sedulous than Clare's, reluctant, even, to surrender Steven to his mother's arms. There Clare would sometimes find her sitting with the baby hugged to her breast, and, in her eyes, the rapt, holy placidness of this vicarious maternity which made Clare's heart glow with thankfulness that such a rapture had been vouchsafed to her, with regret that she would never know another.

"I believe you're a better mother than I am," Clare told her.

"My dear child," said Aunt Cathie airily, "you talk as if I weren't used to babies. Kindly remember that I took charge of you when you were very little older than Steven, and looked after you with my own hands, which is more than Lady Hingston can say for any of her children, in spite of all her pretensions. You needn't trouble yourself about Steven when I'm here, need she, my sweetest?" And as she spoke she would press the baby's rounded face to her own lax cheeks as if, by some physical miracle, she could make the fragile body blend with her own.

Even when she was not at Uffdown Steven occupied Aunt Cathie's mind to the exclusion of her new studies in genealogy. She and Thirza Rudge would hang over the fire of an evening discussing all that had taken place in the Uffdown nursery during the day; and Thirza, still a little huffed by her

unjust exclusion, would open the stores of her traditional experience, which Aunt Cathie smiled at, but greedily absorbed. In every spare moment her fingers were busy with the knitting of minutely ridiculous garments that anticipated the baby's growth, while the hoarding instinct which had disfigured the later stages of the doctor's life began to assert itself in small economies, to Thirza inexplicable and distressing, from the proceeds of which she determined to accumulate a nest-egg, as she called it, for her baby's future. Even at this date she seemed unable to measure the degree of Ralph Hingston's affluence.

Between these forces that competed in their various ways for the possession of Steven, Ellen, more surely than all the others, made him her own. It was in this hope that she had left Pen House for Uffdown; and as soon as the professional nurse departed, Ellen came into her own. This office made her radiantly happy. It mattered nothing to her that Jim Moseley had now deserted his smart housemaid for another and more exalted quarry; no less, this time, than Miss Wilkins, the undertaker's daughter. Steven, whatever others might call him, was her boy, her pet, her handsome. Hers was the sacramental function of the bath; by her he slept in the lace-hooded bassinet at night; in every essential, menial office she was his keeper and protector. She had no other object or devotion in life.

So, in an incense of adulation, and in a faint, half-sickly odour of soap and milk and fuller's earth, the baby grew and throve, staring at the moulded Queen Anne ceiling with wide blue eyes, kicking, with pink legs, the fleecy blanket with which Ellen tried to cover him in vain, laughing, without reason, at Spring suns, that fringed the beeches with a light that was subdued and tender as the songs of willow-wrens, and fired the aged brick of Uffdown to a silvery warmth.

6

WOODLAND STOURTON

FOR Clare, also, the new year brought swift, ecstatic days. Never in all her life had she felt so well; it was as if this first adventure of maternity, in subjecting her body to the last natural function unperformed, had brought it to a maturity that represented the highest point of normal physical fitness. When once she was freed from the restrictions which Steven's early delicateness imposed, the tide of life, at its spring, carried her buoyantly, exhilaratingly forward into the open sea. Before Christmas her riding lessons had begun; and since she was strong, fearless, and dowered with a nice muscular poise, it was not long before she was out with Ralph in the hunting-field, recapturing the sense of adventurous companionship that had seemed in danger of being lost in the months before Steven was born.

The first days of the new year were consumed in this excitement. Now that Clare was with him Ralph no longer boxed his horses far afield for days with the fashionable hunts in the southern part of the county. The Woodland Stourton country lay at the doors of Uffdown and sufficed them. Leaving Steven in the devoted hands of Ellen and Aunt Cathie, they hunted regularly four days a week. Ralph rode with the predatory keenness of the born sportsman; for him hunting was a passion in itself; but for Clare these days in the mired woodland and over the dun fields were full of delights that he could never guess. On them she attained a new and intimate knowledge of

all the country that lay hidden in the hills' gigantic folds; each day revealed some new secret of its beauty, inspired her with some new love for strange green alleys, trailing wind-breaks, and tawny-sanded brooks.

Never until that Spring had she realized how deeply, how inextricably the spirit of the country from which her stock had sprung was incorporated in her own. Other loves might entrance her momentarily—she still remembered Capri and the light that burned out of its lilac crags—but this subdued and dreamy landscape of the Clents, its black rain-beaten spinneys, its grassy uplands falling into the plain, were the background against which her figure found its natural setting. It was her country, and Ralph's, and Steven's; for even when she was most absorbed in it or in the breathless enchantment of a galloping field with hounds streaking out ahead, Steven was never far from her thoughts. When Steven was older she would have so many secrets to show him: that pinewood where the squirrels sprang from swaying branch to branch; that lost lane where, even in February, white violets and primroses were to be found. Even if Ralph could not share these ecstasies, which he regarded with a tolerant amusement as something alien but inherent in her adorable complexity, Steven would understand them some day. For Steven was not a beloved stranger, but part of her own body and mind.

Sometimes, indeed, Ralph found it difficult to sympathize with her discoveries. Hunting, with him, was a serious business. As a breeder of pheasants he diverted into the pursuit of the fox the frank enmity which, in a ruder age, he might have directed against his neighbours; and most of the people who hunted with the Woodland Stourton were cut to the same pattern as himself. That Clare was fearless as a rider was a matter for personal pride; but the fact that, even when

hounds were running, other things could engross her, puzzled him, and made him self-conscious on her behalf; for now that he had become a country gentleman with a stake in the country, the least deviation from the conventional seemed to him perverse and disintegrating, and all eccentricity discreditable.

He wished, in short-and there was nothing behind this wish that failed to recognize Clare's essential goodness of qualified his devotion—he wished, in some ways, that she was more like Mrs. Elvery, the comet whose apparition had lately dazzled the Woodland Stourton's field. Nobody knew exactly where Mrs. Elvery had come from; but the admirable way in which she was mounted implied that she was well-todo. She had hunted in the Shires-so much he knew from Charlie Burnett-and carried with her into the Stourton meets an atmosphere of elegance that would have done credit to Kirby Gate or Wymondham Roughs. She was a slim, dark, childlike woman, older and shorter than Clare; but when she was mounted the trailing habit concealed her deficiency in height. The colour of her cheeks was a thought too high, her mouth a little hard; but when she spoke to men she had a trick of blinking her eyes that called attention to their dark brilliance and made them think of nothing else. She was used to men's society; she liked it, and evidently understood it; for wherever she went they clustered round her, laughing, and listening for the drawl of a smart tongue that was more than a match for the kind of intelligence it attracted.

One morning Charlie Burnett had sidled up to Ralph and told him that Mrs. Elvery wished to know him. She hadn't said that she wanted to know Clare, but Ralph was flattered by her evident approval of himself, so obviously her physical complement in this big blondeness. Often, in later days, they found themselves together; for Ralph was by nature a thruster,

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and Clare, whom he had forbidden to take risks, could be considered safe in the company of Dr. Boyd. He liked Mrs. Elvery. She didn't flirt with him as with the other men. Generally his presence seemed to make her shy; she veiled her eyes persistently, and when she flashed a look at him it was usually to speak of Clare. She told him that she thought Clare lovely. and him a lucky man, so happily placed with a house of distinction, a young wife, and an heir in the nursery. She flattered him; yet, when she spoke of Clare, a sidelong criticism was implied, as though the gentleness, the innocence, the beauty that she praised were pathetic rather than admirable in the eves of a woman of the world. In her presence Ralph was excited by the dangerous suggestions of her personality; afterwards, in Clare's, he was annoyed to think that a woman so obviously inferior should be able to wipe Clare's eve in style. in horsemanship, in all the indefinite things that contributed to Mrs. Elvery's brilliance.

He felt it so necessary to his new dignity that Clare should shine with an identical brilliance that he slowly detached her from most of her new acquaintances, the Abberleys and Ombersleys and Tardebigges who had frequented Uffdown during her year of inactivity, replacing them by the smarter and more rackety society of the hunting set; and since it was part of his programme to make Uffdown a place of liberal entertainment such as he had been used to at Stourford, Clare found herself committed to an endless series of dinner-parties crowded with guests with whom she had little in common and whose presence seemed, in some subtle way, an affront to the sober dignity of the house. Uffdown was still, with her, a touchstone for the judgment of human society, and on these gatherings its mute commentary was severe.

She suffered them because, in all such matters, she thought

it her duty to submit to Ralph's authority. He enjoyed them frankly. To him they represented a continuation of the life to which he devoted himself during the hunting-season, but in Clare the false intimacy of nicknames, the masculine indelicacies of speech, the poverty of a conversation that concentrated on personalities and horses and food and drink, aroused nothing but regret for the quiet evenings which she and Ralph had spent together, and, above all, for the silent piano, which seemed to contemplate their noisy vulgarity with dumb distaste. She could not bear to think that Steven's future would be surrounded by an atmosphere of this kind; for then, she told herself, he would not be like her at all.

Something of this misgiving must have shown itself in her manner toward her guests, for, one evening, when the last of them had gone, Ralph scolded her about it and gave the matter air,

"You're a queer sort of hostess," he said bitterly. "You sat through the whole evening like a funeral. Everyone must have noticed it. You looked as if you hated the lot of them."

His face was flushed and scowling; he stumbled over his words; in the irritable violence of his movements as he undressed and the bitterness of his tone she could see that he had drunk more than was good for him. She felt that it was her duty to herself to be honest with him now or never.

"I did dislike them, Ralph," she said. "They're not our sort of people."

"Not our sort of people? My dear Clare, I don't know what the devil you think you're talking about! They're my friends. That ought to be good enough for you."

"It isn't, Ralph," she said. "There's not one of them that's good enough for you, and you ought to know it. They're people

without a single idea in their heads. I don't like the way they talk with women in the room. That story of Captain Burnett's. . . . Possibly Mrs. Elvery did. And I don't like their familiarity. I object to Mrs. Elvery using my Christian name. I don't know her. I don't want to know her. All they come here for is just to drink your wine, and they drink far too much of it. I'm not sorry if I showed what I felt."

He stared at her in astonishment. This was not the complacent Clare that he knew.

"Burnett?" he said. "I'd no idea you'd object to a thing like that. It's only his fun. Charlie Burnett's as innocent as a lamb, and a damned good sportsman. And Kate Elvery's the best woman to hounds in the county. You'd be none the worse for taking a leaf out of her book in several things. She's as smart as paint, Kate Elvery, and a jolly attractive woman too. . . ."

"So it seems," Clare heard herself saying. "You had no eyes for anyone else all evening."

It was out, this grudge that had lain hidden so deeply and for so long. As she spoke she was appalled by the vulgarity of her own words, and the thought that she could have been capable of uttering them to Ralph. But he was too surprised to think of them in this light. The sense of an injured, technical innocence threw him into a rage.

"My God, Clare," he cried, "how dare you speak to me like that? It's a piece of the most damnable insolence! I won't have it!"

She knew that he was innocent; but the way in which he had risen to her taunts and the violence of his words gave her the justification for which she was longing.

"You needn't shout like that," she said. "The servants will hear you. You forget that Ellen's in the next room."

"Ellen be damned!" he cried, more loudly than ever. "What does that matter?"

"Oh, don't, don't!" she entreated; but now his indignation, like that of Lady Hingston, had fed upon itself and could not be stayed, and his raw and fuddled mind insisted on a retraction.

"Look here, Clare," he said. "I know you're a little prig; but I'm not going to have you accusing me and my friends like that. You've got to tell me what you mean by it."

She couldn't. By this time her accusations had no meaning to her; but he stood there glowering at her so uglily that she knew that there could be no evasion. She began to speak passionately.

"I mean," she said, "that your precious Captain Burnett is just a parasite. As for Mrs. Elvery . . . Well, I won't tell you what I think of her, since you're so sensitive about her, and if you're such a fool that you can't see for yourself. You needn't think I'm jealous either. I'm not. Only it makes me sick to see anyone . . . anyone that I care for like you . . . being so stupidly taken in. And when I think of what we used to be . . . And Steven . . ."

The word was too much for her; her voice broke in the middle of it and all the fight went out of her; she collapsed into tears. She could have kicked herself for breaking down like this. It was weak and shameful of her to do so at a time when she was fighting for her own inalienable rights. She knew that she wouldn't have done so if she hadn't loved him so dreadfully. But when Ralph, harrowed and disconcerted by this sudden, pathetic revelation of her frailty, regained his senses and tried to take her in his arms, her spirit stiffened against him, denying him the satisfaction of such an easy victory. He caught her by the arm so strongly that it hurt.

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"Don't, don't!" she cried. "I can't bear you to touch me. You're hurting me. You smell of whisky. I hate it. . . . I hate it!"

And when he persisted, hoping by the sheer force of their habitual intimacy to woo her back to normal happiness, she relapsed into a sullen bruised silence, which was the only state of which her lacerated nerves were capable. He could not make her speak; she lay stiff and frigid and alien in his arms, suffering his kisses without a tremor of recognition; and in the end he abandoned his coaxing and left her, passing into the dressing-room with the feeling of a man who has suddenly lost all touch with the reality of life, reduced by each new wave of pity or resentment to a more desolate impotence.

As soon as he had gone Clare hurriedly undressed and crept into bed with the pins still in her hair. She closed her eyes. Her heart was beating with an aimless precipitance, driving the blood into a brain that could not think, or, indeed, do anything but suffer. Ralph, by this time sobered and as miserable as herself, put out the light and lay down heavily beside her. He knew better, he thought, than to renew his attempts at endearment. She was a creature beyond all understanding, and if it gave her any satisfaction to feel that she had made him suffer, let her take it.

They lay there in the dark together, silent and wakeful. Clare's eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling on which a screened fire illuminated the conventional plaster scrolls with which some Georgian Ombersley had carefully embellished it. The house was deadly quiet; not a creak in the stairs, no sigh of wind in the frost-enchanted air. It listened, curiously, she thought, for sound or movement from these divided lovers. It was so old, so old, so spiritually remote from such soulharrowing trivialities as theirs; too old even to smile at them;

carrying, in the indelible records of its ether, memories of so many bitter words and passionate reproaches, spoken, repented, and merged at last in the undistinguished lives that had flowered and withered within its walls. In this contemptible difference it could not or would not help her, even though her sense of justice reaffirmed, again and again, the rightness of her indignation.

She was more lonely than she had ever been before. Between her and Ralph, who had absorbed a half of her existence into his own, lay the physical symbol of their spiritual separation, a foot of icy linen sheet. It was not for her, the injured, to bridge that interval. He, who divided her soul, had insulted her with incredible violence; and it was only just that he should pay for it. Even so, she told herself, it was not in his power to abate her loneliness. If only she could have her baby; if only she could take Steven in her arms all would be well and this ugly episode, so dreadfully unworthy of their love, forgotten.

And once again the thought of Steven, innocently sleeping in the adjoining room, betrayed her courage, so that, in spite of all her will to prevent it, her body was shaken again by sobs. She felt the broken rhythm of their impact agitating the bed beneath her. Surely Ralph must feel it. But Ralph did not care. If he did not care it was her own fault, for she had repulsed him. If only, when he had tried his forcible wooing, he had said that he was sorry for having wounded her, she would have borne it better; but that essential thing, it seemed, had never entered his mind. Ralph was stupid and obtuse in matters like that; he had no apprehension of the little delicacies that meant so much to her. And yet, beyond his obtuseness, how good and patient he was: how sweet he had been to her in the days before Steven came! In his simplicity he was almost as

much of a baby as Steven. She had been foolish not to treat him as the child that he was. Perhaps, even now, he wasn't lonely; with him you could never tell; but surely, out of these ruthless sobs which she tried so hard to stifle, he could imagine the depth of her desolation? She held her breath. He was speaking in a strained, unnatural voice:

"Clare, my sweet, I can't bear this much longer."

So he, too, had been suffering in silence. Her own heart was full of pity for him. For a moment her sobbing ceased. But when he stretched out his arm and touched her hot and throbbing side, she could not speak. She lay as quiet as a vixen feigning death until the outstretched arm enveloped her and drew her burning body close to his. She felt a shudder run through her as he clasped her; his fingers encountered the hairpins in her abandoned hair.

"Be careful," she whispered, "you're hurting my head."

His voice made a tender, inarticulate sound; his lips brushed her wet cheek as they came in search of hers; his hands, with their old cunning, verified the shapes of the body that he adored. With no word spoken, with eyes closed against the flicker of the dying fire, they sought and found each other, and later fell asleep in each other's arms.

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DOLLY GRAY

THEY were so young; and since this was the first difference that had ever separated them, Clare emerged from it ashamed and anxious to prove to herself that the episode wasn't as serious as she had imagined. At first she was a little shy and conscious of it as an ugly background to the renewal of their love; but their eager timidities, their forced affectation of a simplicity, like that of children in disgrace, made this renewal very sweet and different from the love that had gone before. Each was so tender, so thoughtful, so assiduous to prove that nothing of moment had occurred, so anxious to make amends.

And, as it happened, the cause of the quarrel was soon to be automatically removed, since the hunting season was now nearing its end: an ironical provision of fate, for Ralph, by this time, had come to see that Clare's estimate of his new friends was a sound one, and Clare, her jealous crisis once resolved, realized that she had nothing to fear from Mrs. Elvery; that Mrs. Elvery, for all her dashing smartness and dangerous guise, was really a lonely, pathetic figure, making a game fight against the passage of time, reduced, for lack of love, to these equivocal comradeships, and more to be pitied than feared.

Moved by these scruples of conscience, Clare made an effort to repair the wrong she had done her by shy friendly overtures; but the dark eyes of Mrs. Elvery remained suspicious—evidently she was unused to frankness on the part of women—and her hard voice assured Clare that she might have saved herself the trouble of her advances. With the end of the season Mrs. Elvery's lease expired, and Uffdown saw no more of her.

Perhaps it was better so. Now that the hunting was over and summer coming on, Uffdown was at its best. All life was at its best; for now Steven had begun to find his tongue and his feet, and Ellen, who had bound his infancy in her cares as in a chrysalis, must now surrender him to Clare. Ralph, too, was forced to see his son's capacity for entertainment, and though he never quite abandoned his male detach-

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ment, they would spend long hours of idleness together, watching the child's bold, inco-ordinate movements, amused by his comical perversions of speech.

To Clare the fascination of this pursuit was endless; she could never tell what new, astonishing phrase Steven might not produce from Ellen's provincial glossary, nor with what exquisite inappropriateness her ears might not be ravished. Now Steven's brain was like a maze in whose intricacies she was content to lose herself all day; and his small body, in the soft mould of which she watched Ralph's beloved lineaments gradually forming, was so young, so sweet, so white, that when, enraptured by some new, fantastic revelation of his little soul, she caught him in her arms, she sometimes felt that she could eat him. "You're a pair of savages, the two of you," Ralph told her. What did it matter, if Eden were as sweet as this?

Midsummer came, and with it the season of haymaking; soft dawns, in which the folded valleys echoed to the drowsy clatter of many mowing-machines. Ralph watched his crops and the barometer anxiously; each day the whispering acres of grass grew more burnished, like tropic seas, ripening to a rare and perfect harvest; each day full sunlight embalmed the Uffdown valley, turning the scarlet garden roses purple and the hedgerow roses white.

Ralph held his hand until the glass began to fall. Then there was work for all of them; Ralph and Clare and Ellen and Bissell and all the other servants tossing the sweet swaths of hay from dawn to the transfiguration of sunset. They laughed and worked together, bright faces and bronzed arms, until the mounded haycocks stood in rows, and a great wain, red and blue, came swaying down the alley between them, to carry the aromatic harvest to the ricks. And Clare, when she was tired, would leave the silvery green of the mown fields to look for

Steven, who crawled upon a rug spread in the shade of the hedgerow under the tutelage of the gardener's youngest boy. And Steven, as she called to him, would smile and stretch out his arms, as though he believed it in his power to reach her from a distance. Then, happy in luxurious fatigue, she would tell the gardener's boy to run away, and lie down beside Steven, who crawled above her, suffocating her with the pressure of his sticky hands; and the nearness of the living child was the richest of all the physical pleasures on which that summer smiled. Even when his fingers tried to open her sun-dazed eyes the discomfort was a pleasure to her, she laughed and laughed, like a vixen at play with her rolling cubs in the shade.

But Steven's bedtime was early; and when Ralph saw that she had risen, he would leave the other haymakers and come over to her with the long strides into which labour had loosened his limbs. He would pick Steven up and perch him on his shoulder, and Steven would chuckle with joy as he swayed at that safe and giddy height, while they walked over the sharp stubbles to the house, so old, so mellow, so kindly; Ralph in his white rolled shirt-sleeves, the down bleached golden on his brown arms; Clare, walking in silence beside him, absorbed in a serenity as hopeful and complete as that of the immaculate sky.

A great hay-harvest, as Ralph triumphantly had prophesied. It seemed no sooner to have been gathered than autumn was on them, for time had flowed so smoothly that, gazing on their mirrored happiness, they had not noticed its flow. By the middle of September frost lay on the lawns.

"In six weeks," Ralph told her, "cubbing will have begun." She was thinking less of foxes than of Steven's birthday. It

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was incredible to realize that a whole year had passed since that terrific day which Ralph, in his lordly acceptance of life, seemed to have forgotten. If time were always to pass as swiftly as this she would be old before she knew it.

Yet, as the day approached, she found that he had prepared a little surprise for her. Once more the date of the board meeting at Wolverbury had come round; once more Lord Arthur had lured him with the prospect of Teme grayling.

"What do you say," he said, "if we make another day of it? No nonsense this time, mind. If I'm to drown, I drown. That's understood?"

They laughed together over his persistent fatalism, by which she always pretended to be shocked.

"It's Steven's birthday," she told him. "We oughtn't really to leave him."

"Steven won't know the difference, you silly child," he scoffed; and in the end she was forced to admit that he was right.

All the way westward in the train he found her strangely silent. "A penny for your thoughts," he said. She blushed, and it was only when he had taken her in his arms that she could bear to whisper to him what she was thinking.

"I was trying to go through all the year," she said, "thinking of everything that has happened. I love to do that. I used to do it years ago at the end of every term at school. Things seem so funny when you look back at them."

"Well, what do you make of it?" he said.

"I don't think I shall tell you."

He knew that tantalizing game of hers so well that he followed the rules of it and would not rest till she had made her confession.

"It's just this," she said at last. "If you look at me so seriously I can't say it. It's just that I think I love you a million times more to-day than I did then."

As they reached the junction on their return the Wychbury train was steaming out of the station. "At any rate, we shan't have to run for it this time," they said. But this time there was no hurry. They spent the half-hour that they had to wait walking up and down the empty platform, warm arm-to-arm, talking of Ralph's fine basket of grayling and laughing at the gossip of the stationmaster's wife who had given them tea in her parlour. The air at Stourton was still and frosty; through it the furnace flares of the Black Country and the twinkling pit-bank fires above Mawne Road shone like the lights of a vast army in bivouac. The down express for Worcester came thundering in, disgorging a handful of passengers, among whom they recognized the insignificant shape of Sir Joseph Hingston. Ralph called to him as he was hurrying out. He turned and moved towards them. He was carrying a copy of the Evening Courier, which he waved as he advanced. A gesture so positive on his part was extraordinary, but when he reached them they saw that his pasty face was lively with excitement.

"Have you seen the news?" he said.

"No. We've been fishing at Little Hereford. What news?" Ralph answered.

Sir Joseph unfolded his paper excitedly.

"It's war," he said. "You saw Chamberlain's last note? Kruger has answered with an ultimatum. Withdraw all British troops. You see? Evidently the Boers want to fight. Madness? Of course it's madness. Unless there's more behind it. Germany, I suppose. It's that business of Delagoa Bay. Still, this means war: a nation like ours can't take an ultimatum lying down. You can have the paper if you want it: I've no time

to spare. I must get on to London and keep the wire open if I can. George went to Sheffield as soon as the news came through. Good-bye then. I telephoned your mother at once. She'll be waiting for me."

"What does it mean?" Clare asked, as soon as he had hurried away.

"Not much to us," Ralph told her, "but a devil of a lot to Wolverbury. It was the Franco-Prussian war that made us. War means shells and rifles, and shells and rifles mean steel. That's where Wolverbury comes in. But though the old man's excited, it won't be much of a flare, unless, as he thinks, there's more beneath the surface. It hasn't half wakened him up though."

"But what is it all about?" Clare asked. "You know I never read the papers, and I don't understand."

"It's these Boers," he told her. "They've been getting uppish for a long time. Ever since the Jameson raid. You remember that, don't you? The Uitlanders . . . eh, it's a deuce of a long story. The fact is that this fellow Kruger, an ignorant old devil by the look of him, has been making things uncomfortable for British subjects, and naturally we aren't going to stand it. We've got to teach him a lesson. All these savage peoples have to be taught manners, just the same as you train a dog."

"But war . . ." Clare persisted. "It seems to me perfectly horrible to think of. You can't teach people by killing them. I should have thought that in these days they'd have found some other way."

"That's rubbish, my child," he told her. "War's the only argument that counts in the long run. An Empire like ours is always at war somewhere or other. We have to assert our prestige."

"It seems dreadful to me," she said, "that Wolverbury should make money out of it. That means that we shall get more money too?"

"Of course it does," he laughed.

"I hate the idea."

"Well, that's merely silly of you. Still, I don't imagine it means much. The guv'nor's exciting himself over nothing. If they don't climb down it'll all be over in a month. You needn't worry your head about the British Army. I suppose Burnett'll be called up. He's on the reserve."

"I'm glad you're not a soldier," she told him.

But, even though he pretended to take the Boer ultimatum so coolly, it had stirred Ralph's imagination, and was so much in his thoughts that when they reached Wychbury he told Bissell the news.

"Old Kruger has sent us an ultimatum, Bissell," he said, as he stepped into the carriage.

"Is that so, sir?" Bissell replied politely. "Well, sir, I reckon it served him right."

Already Stourford and Wolverbury were in the grip of an immense activity. Sir Joseph was soon in touch with Admiralty and War Office, darting backward and forward between London and Wolverbury like a shuttle. Stourford became a house of passage for Government inspectors and officials whose eyes were dazzled by Lady Hingston's sparkling flights. The stables buzzed with perpetual comings and goings. Night-shifts at Wolverbury and Mawne filled the sky with a blood-red reflex, like that of a roused volcano. All through the dark hours hammers thudded unceasingly, the opened furnaces disgorged their pillars of flame, the sound of suffering metal in the rollingmills shrieked on the night, and died against the wooded bases of the hills that protected Uffdown.

CLARE HINGSTON 20

The house itself received all these alarms with a contemptuous calm. It had seen wars before; the repercussions of Ramillies and Waterloo, of Alma and Sedan, had left it standing, superior to small human destinies. In the long orchard grass apples fell, as before. That was the only sound that disturbed its placid nights; and when day came, in its dank, autumnal peace, the garden was as quiet, save for the angry flight of wasps that settled greedily on the night-fallen fruit. All the rare sunshine must be caught for Steven. Steven knew nothing of wars, and Steven's life was Clare's.

It was natural that Ralph, whose thoughts were less absorbed than hers and subject to the excitement that filtered through from Stourford, should be infected by the general commotion. At breakfast he sat so deeply submerged in the morning papers that Clare could not get a word out of him, and in the evening Bissell was dispatched to Wychbury to fetch the Courier. This war was a bigger thing than any of them, except Sir Joseph, had imagined. The Black Country rejoiced in it. A war for gold was what the cranks and visionaries called it. The people of the Black Country knew better. Their god, the god of iron, had decreed it, and his earthly representative, their own Joe Chamberlain, had made it possible, directing into their swollen coffers the golden stream. They followed the fortunes of good old Buller's army as once they had followed those of their football favourites, cheering and howling derision as the game swayed to and fro and booing the celestial referee when things went wrong. A game that paid better than football, and was just as exciting and safe for the spectator. The papers published small-scale maps. Ralph pinned one to the panels of the hall at Uffdown, and Steven, in Clare's arms, stretched out his hands and cried for the coloured flags.

It was only in the hunting-field-for, with November, cub-

bing had begun as usual—that any difference could be detected in their ordinary life. Mrs. Elvery had not renewed her lease of Woodcote. Charlie Burnett had sold his horses—horses were selling well for remounts—and rejoined his regiment of hussars. The fields were thin; for many of the leisured members of the hunt were on the reserve. Now only the farmers hunted. It wouldn't do to let the stock of foxes decrease. In the black days of December the master volunteered. He took Ralph aside during the meet at Stourhead Osiers and gave him his confidence.

"I feel I can't stand aside any longer, Hingston," he said. "I'm not as young as I was; but, after all, I'm a bachelor with no responsibilities except the blessed hounds—hey, Music, damn you, stop that!—nothing to keep me, as I was saying. Now, you're a married man, with a wife and kid of your own. You've every reason to sit tight. As a matter of fact, I'm probably making a fool of myself; the whole thing'll be over before I get to Capetown. Still, it's a cavalry war . . . mounted infantry, anyway; and that's the one job on earth I'm cut out for. Now what do you say to taking on the hounds? I hope you will. I don't mind telling you there's no one else I'd sooner see handling them."

Ralph flushed with pleasure. It seemed as if his good luck had reached its zenith.

"There's no immediate hurry," said the master. "Think it over for a day or two, and let me know how you feel about it. Then I'll put it up to the committee."

He shouted to the huntsman, and the hounds moved on.

Clare was not out that morning. The fox ran up the wind toward the gorse on Uffdown, a desperate line, five fields of plough on end. As Ralph and Starlight sweated over them he was thinking all the time of the chance that luck had given him

to test his theories. And then he began to think of that morning's miserable meet; for by now volunteers were being enlisted, the war had ceased to be a professional affair, and half the farmers' sons who had ridden to hounds were already flaunting the romantic slouch hats of the Imperial Yeomanry, that corps of gentleman riders who were to sweep like a grass-fire over the veld of the Transvaal. Even now there seemed to be very few men of his own age left. Nobody really knew how long this damned war would last. At first they had said that a month would finish it. Good old Buller! But good old Buller lay like a stranded hulk on the Tugela. Now it was Roberts. Little Bobs would do the trick. And Fighting Mac and Backacher Gatacre. There seemed to be a certain virtue in these nicknames; and naturally, in the long run, the British Empire must win and Wolverbury grow fat, however long it lasted. Trust the "absent-minded beggar" for that.

And vet, when he thought of the slaughter and frustration of Modder River and Magersfontein and Colenso, blows that had fallen one after the other during the past fortnight, he couldn't help feeling that his position at Uffdown was a little ignominious. In the last of these engagements Charlie Burnett had been killed. Only six weeks ago he and Charlie Burnett had been galloping together over that line of country. A good fellow, whatever Clare might say. One of the best. That sinewy, laughing comrade, lying crumpled with a bullet in his brain. He grew angry as he thought of Charlie's extinction. He would like to have a whack himself at the dirty Boer sharpshooter who got him. Hunting the fox was a poor game in comparison.

Of course, as the master said, it was no business of his. He was a married man, and had a right to sit tight if he wanted to. But now that he came to think of it, hounds or no hounds, he didn't want to sit tight. He couldn't hunt the Woodland Stourton with a clear conscience when older men had gone to South Africa. It was a question of pride rather than of conviction. He decided to refuse, and felt more virtuous for the renunciation.

As he rode home that evening in the dank December dusk he was puzzling his brain as to how he should break the news of his decision to Clare. Never had the warm and steadfast lights of Stourton seemed to him so homely. As he stalked into the hall in his plough-spattered hunting-kit Clare was sitting in front of a wood fire, with Steven sprawling in the red glare at her feet. She looked up to greet him, smiling, with bright eyes and cheeks. He could not face her yet. Evading her questions, he discarded his boots in the gun-room and went upstairs to his bath. Its warm consolations, and the feeling of clean, physical spruceness and efficiency with which he dressed for dinner, together with a whole bottle of *Château Larose*, put new courage into him.

After dinner, when they were alone, he found himself as tongue-tied as ever, and Clare, who interpreted his silence as a sign of tiredness, passed quietly to the piano and began to play. In the ordinary way her music had no power to move him, but that night the fibres of his mind were strung so tautly that they vibrated in sympathy with her playing; stirred by its plagency, his imagination pictured the moment of parting, her loneliness, and the high-coloured scenes of his own adventure. Her playing seemed to reinforce the poignancy of his picture. It made him see himself and Clare and Steven, objectively, removed, like the romantic figures in an opera. It affected him so deeply that he dragged her off to bed before their usual time.

There, in the kindly darkness which concealed his harassed face, he took her in his arms and began his confession.

"Sir Gilbert is going to South Africa," he told her. "He's offered me the deputy mastership."

"Oh, Ralph, how splendid," she said, and "how jolly of him!"
"Of course it's a compliment. I realize that. But I've refused."

"Why on earth did you do that?" she said. "Would it be too expensive?"

"No. We could afford it quite easily. The works are full of War-Office orders. It isn't that."

"There couldn't be any other reason, my dear boy."

He was silent for a long while.

"Look here, Clare," he said at last. "I know I'm going to hurt you, my darling; but I've got to get it off my mind."

He clasped her closely, as if in this way he might fortify her. Clare held her breath; she had never known him so serious before.

"It's like this," he said. "Ever since we heard about poor Charlie Burnett the other day I've had it on my mind. That business knocked me more than I can say; and now that a middle-aged man like Cashel is going, I don't see how I can possibly stand out. All the fellows of my own age in the district have joined the Yeomanry. Cashel was awfully nice about it—couldn't have been nicer—but when he put it to me like that I felt such a rotten shirker . . . I don't know . . . that I couldn't stick it any longer. I've got to go, Clare. There's nothing else for it. I've simply got to go."

She listened in a silence of annihilation. Instead of thoughts there came into her mind the words and tune of a vulgar song that the butcher's boy whistled in the drive when he came trotting up to Uffdown:

> Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you, Though it breaks my heart to go,

Something tells me I am needed At the front to fight the foe. See the soldier boys are marching And I can no longer stay . . .

In a moment a stronger emotion of dread and something akin to anger at this monstrous perversion had torn the tissue of the arbitrary song to shreds. Against its persistent echoes her lips were speaking with a chilled voice:

"You're going to leave me. . . And Steven . . . Oh, Ralph . . ."

"Clare, my sweet, I can't help it. I've got to. Of course it breaks my heart. (Again that accursed song!) As a matter of fact it's only a . . . a matter of form. Everybody says it will be over in a few weeks. They can't keep it up much longer, and now that Roberts is taking it on . . ."

"Oh, Ralph, Ralph, darling . . ."

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"As Cashel says, the odds are that we shan't even be wanted. Even if we get as far as Capetown, we shall probably be sent home on the next boat. In any case, this is the regular army's job; they'll only use us on railways and block-houses and so on. There's no danger to speak of; only the separation, and that only for a short time, though God knows it's bad enough! Still, Clare, I couldn't look my own servants in the face if I didn't go; and I don't believe you could."

She was silent while he continued his persuasions; she did not even listen to them, for she knew the quality of his obstinate mind. Little by little the thing that had seemed an enormity bore down her protests with the weight of accomplished fact; and out of her acceptance emerged a new emotion: a feeling of spurious pride in his heroism, and, another, more genuine in its origin, of pride in her own capacity for courage and self-control. She was not alone in his trial. All over England other women

were courageously facing a like emergency and putting a brave face on it. How could she show less courage than thousands of other Dolly Gravs?

"You must do what you think right, my darling," she said at last.

She had her reward. It was almost worth the sacrifice and the suffering that she had endured to hear him call her his own, brave girl, his splendid, his wonderful, wife; to be told that not one woman in a million would have shown her sense of honour, her courage, her steadfastness. She lay in his arms and listened, with a sick, elated heart; and that elation, so bright and false and hectic, sustained her, at least in Ralph's brave presence, until the day that followed the sinister tidings of Spion Kop, the twenty-first of January, when the sound of cheering died away upon the quay at Southampton, and she found herself alone and staring at the harbour filth that lapped the landing-stage where, half an hour before, he had thrown her kisses from the transport's deck.

8

TRANSIT OF MARS

FOR what they were worth Clare had no lack of comforters. The Stourford people rallied at once to her loneliness. In Sir Toseph this sympathy took the obvious form of cheques, which was the only one in which he could express himself; while Lady Hingston, delighted to find that Ralph, for once in a way, had contributed to the prestige of Wolverbury by volunteering, proceeded to exploit her as a walking advertisement of Stourford's patriotism. All of them, even Vivien, seemed to take the

credit of Ralph's adventure to themselves, as a gallant, romantic gesture, in keeping with the family character, with nothing but the very slightest spice of danger in it. None of them, except, perhaps, Marguerite, who unnerved Clare with the pitiful glances of her melting eyes, seemed to realize the desolation in which Ralph's departure had left her.

Once more she found herself falling back on the society of Aunt Cathie and her first Uffdown friends. Aunt Cathie knew that war, even this romantic South African picnic which was always going to be over within a month, was a desperate business. As a little girl she remembered tearing up sheets to make bandages for the wounded of eighteen-seventy, and though she couldn't, like the Abberleys and Ombersleys and Tardebigges, isolate from the daily lists of casualities the names of family connections who had fallen, and share in the proud sufferings of the military caste, she behaved, in every respect, as though the Weirs were a family of soldiers, whose ramifications permeated the army list from cover to cover, and she herself a typical representative of the old stock into whose hands the military destinies of England were committed; so that when the Miss Abberleys lost a nephew, or the Tardebigges a secondcousin, infinitely removed, she would persuade herself that her own family was involved in the casualty and bring the virtue of heroic patience to bear on it.

"You must never forget, Clare," she said, "that one of your own great-uncles was a lieutenant in the Marines and retired with the rank of captain in the senior service; and the doctor himself was one of the very first to join the volunteer movement in eighteen-fifty-nine. Riflemen, they used to call them. We still have his helmet and his sword—I don't suppose you ever noticed them hanging up in the hall? I'd almost forgotten them myself until the other day. The plume on the helmet was

dreadfully moth-eaten; but Tabez has polished up the sword with pumice-stone, and now it looks quite deadly."

Aunt Cathie had become an assiduous reader of the new Daily Mail. It was she who kept the movements of Ralph's flags on the map of South Africa up to date. Clare could not even bear to look at them: but with Aunt Cathie the ceremony was a sacramental duty; her heart thrilled with joy and thankfulness when she pinned the Union Tack into the spots marked Ladysmith and Kimberley, as though the relief of the beleaguered dorps were a personal triumph in which her enthusiasm had played a vicarious part. At Pen House she had a map and flags of her own; but she could not bear to think that the one at Uffdown was ever out of date, and so, whenever there was any signal movement to record, she hurried over and forsook her task of visiting reservists' and yeomen's wives to drive pins into Dutch-named towns with something of the belief in sympathetic magic that impels a black magician to pierce the waxen effigy of his enemy.

Clare smiled at her, and yet the fact that Aunt Cathie's interest in the war was not, like that of the Stourford people, primarily commercial; that she was "in it" heart and soul. regarding it as an ordeal and a penance rather than as a brilliant smile of fortune, made her glad of her company. Beneath Aunt Cathie's brisk enthusiasms she knew that she could count on a genuine and serious sympathy; there was no other who realized the strain of hope and fortitude that lay beneath her own serenity. It came as a surprise to her one day when she found Ellen, with Steven in her arms, silently weeping in front of the flag-spangled map. Her own voice trembled when she asked what was the matter; for Ellen's father and brother, as she knew well enough, were still hammering ploughshares in Wychbury.

"It all come over me of a sudden, ma'am," said Ellen. "It's Jim Moseley I was thinking of."

Clare smiled. "Jim Moseley? Why, Ellen, I thought you'd finished with Jim a year ago and more. Didn't you tell me that he was walking out with Miss Wilkins?"

"He was, ma'am," said Ellen, "but now he's gone and joined those yeomanry. Last Sunday that ever was, I seed that chitty-face of his laughing in the horse-road as bold as if he'd never gone. I felt that mad I could have scratched her, behaving herself like that when my poor Jim's out along with them dirty Boers. She hasn't got a heart as big as my little finger, ma'am, and my poor Jim's that simple; supposing they was to shoot him, he'd never know." She began to cry again, and Steven, overwhelmed by the proximity of her emotion and shaken uncomfortably by her sobs, thought fit to imitate her.

"Why, Ellen, you mustn't cry like that," Clare told her. "I'd no idea that you were still thinking of Jim."

"I bain't, ma'am; I bain't," Ellen helplessly protested. "It only just come over me."

"But if you feel like that," said Clare, "you can't have forgotten him. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll get Miss Weir to find out his address and you shall send him a card, just to show him that someone is thinking of him."

"Oh no, ma'am, I couldn't do that," said Ellen, flushing magenta. "I couldn't so demean myself; indeed I couldn't!"

Yet, now that she knew how Ellen was sharing in secret a little of her own preoccupation and dread, Clare felt less isolated in her loneliness. Shyly she found herself, on small pretences, seeking Ellen's society and speaking to her of Ralph, as though the equality in kind of their anxiety had made the nursemaid her most fitting confidante. She saw that Ellen, like herself, found her most effective diversion in Steven, and some-

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times hesitated, as in honour, to deprive her of that solitary consolation at moments when she seemed most happy and courageous. And Ellen, just as in the old days at Pen House, would talk to her about Iim Moselev's love-making, and show her what a splendid fellow Jim was if only he hadn't lost his head. A strange sisterhood, she told herself, but one that made her respectful of Ellen's steadfastness and glad that she had taken her to Uffdown where she was understood.

She felt, indeed, so tenderly for Ellen, that when Ralph's first letter arrived from the Cape she took pains to conceal her elation. That precious document coloured her life for many days on end. She read it over and over again, even when she knew every word of it by heart, trying to extract from the smudged pencil-lines and Ralph's characteristic, awkward phrasing the essence of a personality that he was powerless consciously to express.

My own sweet darling (it ran),

This is just a line to let you know that we've arrived in Capetown. My squadron are a good lot of chaps, the squadron-leader hunts with the Croome, and most of the troopers are young farmers. The food was pretty bad, especially when we crossed the line, but Capetown was all right, apart from the wind. It's a bit like Italy, that coast we used to look at from Capri. I forget the name of it. Now I hear that Roberts is expected to enter Bloemfontein any day, which means, I suppose, that our lot won't see any of the fun. We're in a place called Stellenbosch, not so bad on the whole. Oak trees in the streets that the Dutch planted. They make you a bit homesick. The place is full of remounts and poor devils that have been sent back here by Kitchener, who seems to be a thruster. There's a river that looks as if it ought to hold trout, but as it's autumn here the water's low and gin-clear. I forgot to tell you that our staff-captain, a fellow named Hart, a regular, was a pal of poor Charlie Burnett. No other news. Kiss Steven for me, and all the kisses in the world for yourself, my sweet.

Your loving husband.

Ralph.

PS.—The news has just come through that Bobs is in Bloemfontein, and we shall go up the line for garrison duty. They say the whole show will be over in a fortnight, so you can expect me soon. I hope the men are behaving decently. I've written Bissell separately about jobs I want doing.

It was so like him; simple, unimaginative, confident, brave—perhaps, even, a little ordinary; but, at this distance, all these qualities, the last included, had power to enrapture her, just because they were his. That letter had been written more than three weeks ago. Now the occupation of Bloemfontein, of which he spoke as a rumour, was an old accomplished fact. Each day Clare watched Aunt Cathie's flags moving relentlessly northward, the symbols of a physical barrier that shielded her love from harm; for now, but for the protracted siege of Mafeking, the fighting seemed to be as good as over.

Ralph wrote as badly and cheerfully from Bloemfontein. There seemed to be no chance of moving from that accursed spot. A rotten hole, he called it, full of dust and corrugated iron; the nights, under canvas, were growing bitterly cold. They were killing time, he said, until French had mopped up the remainder of the Boer forces further north. Always, in his letters, the end of the war was a matter of weeks; the phrase became so monotonous in its repetitions that she counted on it no longer. "As soon as there's any sign of moving," he wrote, "I'll send you a cable. It can't be very much longer."

Early one afternoon the two Miss Abberleys came to call in mourning deep enough to represent the sum total of the family's losses. Their nephew, a gunner, and one of Kitchener's Stellenbosch victims, had written to them, a little jealously, about the scandals of Capetown.

"I suppose that sort of thing," said the elder, "is inseparable from the idea of war; but it does seem monstrous, as

Rupert says, that while we are bearing the brunt of the struggle at home and praying for our dear ones night and day, a lot of frivolous society women should have the power to pull strings—that's how it's done, my dear—and get out there, where there are no restrictions, simply to prey upon the husbands of women who are doing their duty in England."

Clare had never heard so much as a whisper of these harpies. "My dear," said the younger Miss Abberley solemnly, "they're flooding the whole country. They stop at nothing, I'm told. Of course, they wear a Red Cross uniform. It makes me grow white with anger when I remember Florence Nightingale. They follow our poor men like the vivandières that are attached to the French army—perhaps you have never seen The Daughter of the Regiment?—and I'm sorry to say that several ladies from these parts are among them. I wonder if you remember a Mrs. Elvery, who took Woodcote for the hunting season two years ago? Well, she's in Bloemfontein. She sent a postcard from there to Mrs. Merriman, an old servant of ours, who used to keep house for her."

"In Bloemfontein?" Clare gasped.

"If I had any influence," Miss Abberley continued, "I should make a point of writing to the authorities and warning them myself. I understand that General Kitchener is a confirmed bachelor, and naturally can't be expected to notice things of that kind."

In Bloemfontein! From that moment that she had heard the word Clare lost her head completely. Beneath the conventional politeness with which she bade the Miss Abberleys farewell her heart was beating with a renewal of wild fear; for now the simplicity, which she had adored in Ralph, seemed to threaten all their happiness. Suppose he were "killing time" with Mrs. Elvery?

Suddenly the atmosphere of Uffdown became stifling. She felt that she must escape from it, and from herself. Bundling her precious letters together she set off wildly up the Sling valley and into the high air of that hill-top, by Brimsley, which had become one of the sacred places of their love. There, on the grassy mound of the old barrow, she sat under the sullen April sky and read her letters over and over again. She read of the dreariness of Bloemfontein, the dusty streets, the frozen nights. In all his letters, as she knew already, there was no mention of Mrs. Elvery. Bloemfontein was a small town: it couldn't be possible that he didn't know that Mrs. Elvery was there. Why had he never mentioned her? The answer was easy enough: to spare her feelings. But, oh, how foolish of him! Mightn't he have known that it would have been easier for her to hear it from him than from these prurient, cackling old maids?

Her doubts—she would not admit that they were doubts—all crystallized into a furious, sick hatred of the unfortunate Abberleys, who had merely performed their usual function of propagating scandalous small-talk. She wondered if they knew more; if they had actually introduced the subject and Mrs. Elvery's name to put her on her guard, to break the sudden impact of her fall. The hill-top was sullen and desolate. Northward the smoke of Mawne and Wolverbury rose like a symbol of the war's brooding energy; southward the dun plains fell away over the earth's curve into the seas and continents that rolled between her and Ralph. Her doubt, her desolation, came to her lips in a lonely cry, as feeble as the bleat of a lost lamb:

"Oh, Ralph, my love, my darling!"

But, though she had almost expected a reply, nothing answered her. She knew that she had no right to an answer. This

blind, unreasoning panic of hers was beneath contempt. "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" she asked herself. Ashamed, humiliated and miserable beyond words, she made her way homeward; but even when she had reached the protective shadow of Uffdown her fear was not healed, for there every shape of stone or tree accused her faithlessness, calling to mind a hundred rapturous moments that should have assured her.

Craving the support of these she crossed the lawn, where now only the black cedars were in leaf, to the grey hedge of rosemary and the orchard beyond. It was there that she and Ralph had stood and kissed on their first visit to Uffdown; surely some influence of that sacramental occasion must cling to its air. The twisted apple-trees stood shagged with a silvery blight; beneath them the grass of last year's aftermath straggled above the new green of spring. Clare stood there in the fading light, and gradually the inertia of that unchanging silence weighed upon her spirits and calmed them. There was no movement anywhere, save on the lawn, where Waldron, the gardener, was moving about like a hedgehog in the dusk, on some unimaginable business. Suddenly her suspended senses came to life. She called to Waldron, who answered, and began to hobble over to her. He touched his cap, and waited for her commands.

"I've just been looking at the orchard, Waldron," she said. "It seems to me most awfully untidy, with all the grass growing high like that. I shouldn't like your master to come home and fine it such a perfect wilderness. You know he may come home any day now and take us by surprise. Don't you think you could scythe it or something, and make it look a bit more tidy?"

"Well, yes, m'm," said the gardener, scratching his head. "I

don't see as something couldn't be done; though, rightly speaking, if you can take my meaning. . . . You see, it's like this, m'm: this here eddish, as they call it . . ."

She did not listen to him. Ellen was hurrying over the lawn with Steven in her arms. She shouldn't have carried him out like that in the damp evening air. She hurried straight up to Clare and held out a telegram.

"It's just come, ma'am. The boy's waiting for an answer. I just caught sight of you and thought it might save time."

Clare took it and opened it. Waldron paused, out of politeness, in the middle of his apologies. "You shouldn't have brought Steven out into the damp like this, Ellen," she said. And all the time she was thinking: "At last! He's coming home. What a fool I've been! It must have been this that made me speak to Waldron about the orchard."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't think of it," Ellen murmured humbly. "I thought, being a telegram, it must be something urgent." Her reply dwindled away to nothing; for Clare was still straining her eyes to read:

"Regret to inform you," she read. "Lieut. Hingston . . . enteric . . . Bloemfontein."

She was speaking:

"It doesn't matter about the orchard, Waldron. Your master died yesterday. In Bloemfontein."

She turned her back on them and moved desperately into the orchard. They looked at her bewildered, then constrained by an instinctive delicacy, went away together. Clare passed blindly into the dusk of the apple-orchard, neither knowing nor caring where her feet might carry her. Her heart was so broken that she could not feel the wet grasses that waylaid her shuddering limbs. She had no words or thoughts of her own. Only through the white-hot vacuum of her brain a single

phrase went singing, madly, madly: O sweet place, desolate in tall, wild grass. O sweet place, desolate, desolate, desolate . . .

There, in a stupor that seemed more terrible than death, Aunt Cathie, whom Ellen had discovered glued to the evening paper, found her. Aunt Cathie could do nothing with her. Clare only wanted to be left alone.

"But you'll catch your death of cold, my darling. Do come with me," Aunt Cathie persuaded her.

She allowed herself to be led back to the house, where she lay curled up on the sofa, before the hall fire, like a sick animal. Aunt Cathie sat and watched her, with dry and dreadful eves, far into the night.

"I want Steven," she said at last.

Aunt Cathie passed on tiptoe upstairs and took the sleepflushed child from Ellen's arms. Poor Ellen could not sleep. She wanted Steven too, Aunt Cathie put the baby into Clare's arms. Clare hugged him and hugged him desperately, but still she could not cry. It was harrowing to see this dry and ice-bound grief. Steven was so drugged with sleep that he never opened his eyes. At last in the middle of the night, Clare spoke again:

"I can't stay here," she said. "Do you think we could go over to Pen House?"

"Of course we could, my darling. I think you'd be happier there."

"Happy?" Clare echoed in a strangled voice. "How can you say such a word? It's the end of everything . . . everything."

Aunt Cathie shook her head in pitiful silence. For her also, many years ago, the world had come to an end. And yet she was still alive, its last and obstinate survivor.



BOOK FOUR

FATHERLESS BAIRN



I

BO-PEEP

ON Steven's tenth birthday his grandmother, Lady Hingston, gave him a Shetland pony. It was only two feet seven inches high, and its name was Bo-peep. From the moment on that crisp September morning, when Auntie Vivien rode smiling up the Uffdown drive with Bo-peep on a leading rein, the pony entered and possessed all Steven's heart. If he could have taken her to bed with him he would have done so; but since this privilege had been denied him in the case of Sly, the roughhaired terrier, who was much smaller than Bo-peep, he had to surrender that ambition, and Bo-peep slept, with infinitely more comfort, in a corner of the one occupied box in the empty quadrangle of stables, along with Angus, the last of the great Clydesdales, which Bissell, the coachman, and Steven's father had bred in the days before the Boer war. Angus and Bo-peep had taken to each other immediately; Steven's mother told him that this was because they were both of Scots descent.

But even if he couldn't take Bo-peep to bed with him, Steven could be present at her morning toilet. So he used to bolt his breakfast and scandalize Miss Pidgeon, his governess, in order not to miss a moment of it; and Bissell, who, in this diminished Uffdown, had time on his hands by which the pony's coat profited, would prolong the ceremony well into the hour of the Scripture lesson by an endless flood of secular information and reminiscence about the good old times when the Uffdown stables were "something like."

"In those days, Master Steven," he'd say, "the master had as pretty a string of 'unters and 'acks as you'd wish to set eyes on. Every one of them but poor old Starlight, what we 'ad to shoot, went out to Africa. Horseflesh didn't count for nothing there. And them Clydesdales of ourn! Folks'd come from all over the country to see them . . . get over, Angus, yer durned old fool! No, Master Steven, the times is changed, and no mistake, what with this here Lloyd George—a pro-Boer I hear 'e was: 'e wouldn't 'ave been pro-Boer if they'd copped 'im as they copped me!—and them stinking motor-cars, bost them! Now then, Bo-peep. Now then, little girl!"

Then Bissell's voice would subside into the soft hiss of a burst hose-pipe—all the stable hose-pipes at Uffdown were tied up in rags—and Steven, watching, would surrender himself to a hypnotic mixture of sensual sedatives compounded of Bissell's homely drawl, his hissing, the stable-odours of hay, old wood and horses, and the pungent golden dust from the curry-comb, under which his heart gloated lazily on its new possession, that toy horse with the shaggy, pleasant-smelling neck, the obstinate forefeet, the muzzle of living velvet, and the big dark eyes, mysteriously blinking at him out of a head three sizes too large.

Over and over again, in these slow-spoken memories, Bissell would hark back to Steven's father, the master, as he called him; his mother did the same; and to each of them Steven listened with a polite distraction, his true mind being set on matters of more personal moment, such as Bo-peep, the pink-

nosed ferrets in the keeper's bag, or the rat, trapped overnight in the cobwebbed loft, whose beady eyes, full of fearful hatred, stared at Sly out of the corner of its wire cage. This father, of whom everybody whispered to him so reverently, had no real existence in his mind. Unrealizable by any feat of memory, the figure took its place beside other vague mythological abstractions with which his elders bewildered him: such as God and Jesus Christ, to whom his mother had taught him to say his prayers; Mr. Arthur Balfour, the only man (she said) that Miss Pidgeon could ever have married; the Doctor, whose image dominated the admonitions of Aunt Cathie, or the bogeyman, who made terrible the stories of Aunt Cathie's Thirza Rudge; shapes that inhabited a world outside his own, which was already sufficiently full to keep him busy.

That world of his, though bounded, in fact, by the narrow limits of Uffdown, Pen House, Stourford, and the hills that sheltered them, was so crowded with interests living and inanimate that, even if he had been aware of others beyond it, Steven's mind could scarcely have expanded to embrace them. As yet those parts of it which lay beyond the beech-shadowed drive were still foreign and adventurous; but within the gates of Uffdown, the limits—saving Miss Pidgeon—of legitimate freedom, there was no person over whom he couldn't—and didn't, on occasion—assert his prerogative.

That Steven should have been spoilt was the inevitable result of the pathetic circumstances of Clare's young widow-hood, and the unusual legacy of strength and beauty which he had inherited from his father; but with this dangerous endowment was blended the Hingston strain of wilfulness, so marked in his paternal grandmother, which people, according to the nature of their relations with her, described alternately as genius or insanity.

From the very first Steven had shown himself a passionate child. Even in babyhood, the least opposition to his wishes had thrown him into a red tempest of inarticulate rage, so ludicrous in its futility that Clare, knowing herself unable to subdue it, would stand and smile at him until the tea-cup storm was over. But, as the years went by, these passionate disturbances had become no matter for smiling. Behind them, with the growth of an intelligence precociously acute—and, for the lack of other children's influences, mature—there lurked a stubborn and calculating will, a ruthless concentration on the attainment of his own ends that was almost frightening in so young, and withal so beautiful a creature.

On Clare herself the violence of these miniature thunderstorms rarely fell. Perhaps she was blind to them; perhaps the unconscious workings of her love for Steven were cunning to foresee and to avoid them; perhaps the child's own passionate affection, and the knowledge that, in the end, she was incapable of denying him anything, spared her. But the servants, from Ellen, Styles, the butler, and the admirable Bissell downward, knew all about them; and, more than anybody, the governess, who had come to Uffdown when Steven was seven, through the recommendations of the Vicar, Mr. Pomfret.

Miss Pidgeon, familiarly known as "poor" Miss Pidgeon, was a middle-aged young woman with a record of employment in superior families, whom circumstances had reduced to an unfamiliar but never undistinguished level in the social scale. Other people might sometimes forget that Miss Pidgeon was a lady; Miss Pidgeon never forgot. On Steven's half-holidays, when she took tea in her own room, she made it in her own silver teapot and served it on a silver tray; and Ellen, who washed the teaspoons in the still-room afterwards and was corroborated by Mr. Styles, the butler, reported that each

of them was embellished by a crest—an unquestionable pigeon—with a scroll and the motto, *Harmless as Doves*, beneath it.

When first she came to Uffdown Miss Pidgeon assured Mr. Pomfret that Steven was a sweet child though sadly undisciplined. "But we shall soon alter that," she added confidently. "The thing that disturbs me most," she added, "is the fact that, apart from the usual childish prayers, his mother appears to have given him absolutely no religious instruction. You know, Mr. Pomfret, I'm not a bigoted woman; but when a bright child of seven has never even heard the story of Samuel and Eli . . ."

Mr. Pomfret checked her with an understanding smile. "It's a sad business," he assured her cheerfully. "Mrs. Hingston lost her husband early and tragically in the Boer war, and I don't think she has ever quite recovered the—er—faith which this blow shattered. Before her marriage she was—I might almost say—morbidly religious. She is still very young; no doubt with the swing of the pendulum, or, rather, in God's good time, she will return to the—er—golden mean; and as for Steven, you, I'm sure, Miss Pidgeon, will more than supply the deficiency."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Miss Pidgeon, glowing beneath the compliment. "I must confess," she added, "that I am rather distressed to feel the general lack of discipline at Uffdown. One might almost describe it as a disorderly house."

Mr. Pomfret flushed suddenly. "I hope, Miss Pidgeon, you will never do that," he said. "The word 'disorderly,' in that connection, has a technical significance."

What that significance might be Miss Pidgeon's respect for the cloth prevented her from enquiring. She returned to Uffdown encouraged by his approval, and conscious of a new mission in life, which was very nice for her; and, for a little while, Steven, impressed by her tall thinness, her gold spectacles, and, above all, by the shining silver belt that fortified her solar plexus, was as sweet and mild as any dove engraved upon her teaspoons.

His sharpness amazed her; within a few months he was as pat with Old Testament genealogies as herself. It was only when his acuteness realized that the silver belt concealed extremely vulnerable emotions that the wisdom of the serpent declared itself. From that moment, as Bissell vulgarly and perhaps maliciously put it, he had Miss Pidgeon on toast. For three years he had kept her there, tempering the fire of his mischievous tortures with periodical bastings of an emollient, an utterly disarming sweetness which softened the heart that she had hardened against him.

From the first poor Miss Pidgeon had realized that in matters of discipline she could not rely on anything but a formal support from Steven's mother. In Clare's eyes the child could do no wrong that could not be expiated by a few mild words of reproof and an orgy of forgiving kisses. Miss Pidgeon was far too proud to enlist the sympathies of servants; and Mr. Pomfret, for all the reverence due to him, was not as serious as she would have wished a rural dean to be. She knew that her duty towards her own self-respect required that she should own herself beaten and retire in good order from Uffdown; but making tea with a silver tea-pot in a cheap bed-sitting-room was an experience that she had known already and could not face again. At times she thought of appealing to Steven's grandmother; but, when the moment came, the presence of Lady Hingston was so overpowering, the challenge in her black eyes so scornful, that all Miss Pidgeon's fine determinations shrank into a little frozen lump beneath the centre buckle of her waistband. In any case, she consoled herself afterwards, whatever else she might

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be, Lady Hingston wasn't a lady, and wouldn't have understood her.

As a last resort, with proud and shameful tears, she confided her troubles to Aunt Cathie. Miss Weir, as she had anticipated, listened to them in a sympathetic and ladylike way.

"I'd no idea it was as bad as that, Miss Pidgeon," she said.

"It's worse," Miss Pidgeon declared passionately. "Sometimes I can hardly restrain myself from saying that he's a devil—and then, at others, he's so sweet. I'm really very fond of him, Miss Weir. Only I can't . . . I simply can't go on like this."

"You've spoken to his mother . . . seriously?"

"Oh, dear, yes—a thousand times. Excuse me; perhaps I'm exaggerating a little. But you know yourself, Miss Weir, what Mrs. Hingston is. Compared with you and me, she's nothing but a child herself."

"The fact of the matter is," said Aunt Cathie, "that Steven has an abnormally strong character like his grandfather, the doctor. I'm sure there's no real evil in him . . ."

"Oh no, no real evil!" Miss Pidgeon agreed.

"And it's equally clear that he needs the influence of men. He ought to go to school."

A vision of that bed-sitting-room chilled Miss Pidgeon's heart.

"Perhaps I've been exaggerating; I'm sure it will all come right," she ventured. "I'm afraid it's that dreadful pony that's turned his head."

"You can leave the matter in my hands," said Aunt Cathie, decidedly, flushed with a sense of triumph that, for once, it wasn't in Lady Hingston's. Miss Pidgeon's final attribution

of the whole mischief to the demoralizing influence of Bo-peep provided her with a cause of righteous indignation with which to start her campaign.

2

AUNT CATHIE'S SPOKE

TWO days later, Aunt Cathie, who, since the death of her old coachman Jabez, had so far compromised with the spirit of progress as to purchase a bicycle, came whizzing over from Pen House to Uffdown and launched her attack. In the interval her mind had brooded constantly on the Shetland pony's iniquity. The fact that Lady Hingston had given Bo-peep to Steven would have been sufficient to damn the beast and everything connected with it in her exes; but since these feelings were hardly a valid basis for argument, she had to find others.

"My dear Clare," she began, "I don't like to think that Steven is spending so much of his time in the stables. Of course I know that this wretched pony is a novelty and that he's bewitched by it for the moment; but we have to think of the future. The child's at an impressionable age, and the company of grooms is not a refining influence."

Clare shook her head. "My dear Aunt Cathie, Bissell's such a safe man; I don't know what I should have done without him. And he's absolutely devoted to Steven. Honestly I don't think he can come to any harm."

"I'm not thinking," Aunt Cathie maintained, "of his physical safety. I'm quite sure Bissell has sense enough to look after that. But you forget, my dear child, that Bissell, with all his virtues, is a coarse man who began life as a stud-groom. Their

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standards are very different from ours. I don't mean that Bissell would consciously set out to corrupt the child; but Steven is inquisitive; he may ask questions on unpleasant subjects, and Bissell, in all good faith, may answer them." Aunt Cathie lowered her voice: "I've been told," she said, "that more children lose their innocence through coachmen than in any other way; and I quite believe it."

She spoke so solemnly that a little wave of anxiousness ruffled Clare's serenity before she could reassure herself.

"No, no," she said at last, "You mustn't be too serious. I've every confidence in Bissell, and Steven would be devastated if he were separated from Bo-peep. It's in his blood. Steven's a manly child. The Hingstons are mad on horses. You remember Ralph."

Aunt Cathie bridled: "It passes my comprehension, Clare, how you can persist in saying that Steven's a Hingston. There's nothing Hingston about him. He grows more like the doctor every day. All father's little tricks . . . Thirza was only pointing out last week the way he puts his little head on one side. It's the doctor to the life! He's a Weir from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. Why," she added triumphantly, "he even has my headaches!"

Aunt Cathie proclaimed the mournful fact as if it had the virtue of a hall-mark; and Clare, although she knew it only too well, forbore to suggest that the bilious attacks that prostrated the child descending suddenly as a thunder-storm, condemning her to sit for hours beside him in the darkened dressing-room which had once been Ralph's, were usually sequels to his visits to Pen House or Stourford, where Aunt Cathie and his grandmother, in brief assertions of their proprietary rights, each contrived to steal a march on the other in the small animal's affections by loading his stomach with rich and poisonous delicacies. Nobody, at any rate, could accuse Aunt Cathie of not practising what she preached; and Clare, remembering her orgies of creamhorns at Battie's, was silent."

"I know, Clare," Aunt Cathie persisted, "it's no good my telling you all over again how I feel about Stourford. You realize what I think, and I'm not in the habit of changing my opinions, thank heaven! But, all the same, the older people in the district"—the shadow of the surviving Miss Abberley tinged her voice with offended propriety—"do feel that Stourford is getting more vulgar every day. What with the hundreds of thousands they made out of the war, and the Prime Minister's staying there, and then, these motor-cars! I heard they had got another, bigger than ever; but fortunately I hadn't seen it till the other day. I was riding quietly along the lane on my way to pay a call on Susan Abberley when the horrid thing came hooting and smelling round the corner in a cloud of dust, so violently that I nearly wobbled into the ditch. I rang my bell, but it made no difference. The chauffeur, or whatever they call him, gave me the most withering stare, and Lady Hingston, lolling in the tonneau—everything about the wretched thing is foreign!-never as much as looked at me. I suppose they expect us all to lie down flat like natives in front of a Juggernaut. Now do admit it, Clare: isn't it enough to make the poor doctor shudder in his grave?"

"Even worse than horses, Aunt Cathie," Clare murmured. "Now you're laughing at me! But haven't we any more law or order in the country? Can't we respectable, inoffensive cyclists protest against it? Really, I don't know. I must ask Dudley Wilburn what my legal position is. Personally I always make a point of dismounting and putting my handkerchief to my nose to remind them, supposing they have any feelings, of the smell and dust they're making. But that, my

child, is only a symptom, as the doctor used to say, of the kind of life into which Steven will be dragged if you're not careful. A fast life, Clare!"

"Oh, Aunt Cathie!"

"No, no, I love you, and you're a dear good child; but I know that that's the line of least resistance, and I don't believe you're strong enough to fight against it yourself. If only poor dear Ralph had been alive to strengthen your hand!"

"By this time, dear Aunt Cathie, he'd have been as mad on motoring as Vivien."

"Of course you think you know more about it than I do: but the fact remains that the Stourford people do spoil him."

"We all spoil him, my darling. You and I and Lady Hingston and Vivien and Miss Pidgeon and Thirza and everybody. You can't help spoiling him; and I don't believe he's any the worse for it!"

Aunt Cathie made a gracious exception:

"Not if the spoiling is your kind or mine. But as things are, with so many influences at work, the poor child will never get any sense of direction. He's ten years old, Clare." Aunt Cathie took Clare's hand in hers. "I know you'll hate me for saying it, but you and Miss Pidgeon can't educate him between you: he needs the influence of a man, and not the influence of a man like Bissell. Poor Miss Pidgeon, I'm sure, is far too wellbred to leave you in the lurch; but the woman's nerves are worn to shreds. Steven is too old and strong for her. She'll have to give in."

"Why?" Clare suddenly warmed. "Has Miss Pidgeon been complaining to you?"

"Of course she hasn't. What an idea!" said Aunt Cathie. lving briskly.

"When did she tell you that?" Clare persisted.

"I really don't know. Some time ago. The day before yesterday," Aunt Cathie confessed in stages, quailing before her conscience and Clare's eyes.

"Why on earth didn't she tell me?"

"Because, my dear child, she knew it would be a waste of time. She doesn't want to go: anyone can see that. But really it's Steven, not poor Miss Pidgeon, who must be considered . . ."

"How cruel these old maids are," Cathie thought.

". . . and, in any case," Aunt Cathie continued, "her feelings are one of the disguises of Providence. It's really time that Steven went to school."

Once she had shuddered at it; but the word had an ominous sound in Clare's ears. Of late she had heard it so often that, like any terror endlessly repeated, it had lost some of its power to frighten her.

"I know that you're right," she said. "Sooner or later it's got to come. Lady Hingston was only talking about it last week."

"Oh, was she?" Aunt Cathie answered hastily. "No doubt she has some new, big, fashionable ideas on the subject. Don't think for a moment I mean her kind of school, Clare. Now, Dudley Wilburn . . ."

"Thank you for reminding me; he's dining here to-night on his way back from Worcester Assizes. I'd quite forgotten. But you mustn't be unjust to her, Aunt Cathie. They want me to send him to Cheam . . . preparatory for Eton, you know."

"I know nothing of the sort." Aunt Cathie hastened to disown acquaintanceship with anything that was common knowledge at Stourford. "The doctor," she continued, "was at Rugby under the father of Mr. Matthew Arnold. By all

accounts that's a much more manly school. A healthier situation, too, and so much nearer home," she added persuasively. "That afternoon when Lady Hingston nearly ran me down Miss Abberley was telling me that in these days all kinds of rich and vulgar people send their sons to Eton; in fact, it hasn't anything like the distinction it had at the time when the Duke of Wellington spoke so nicely about the playing-fields, which everybody says are generally under water. Clare, you're too gentle, you let these people come over you. Now Dudley Wilburn . . ."

Her voice died away and was lost in a confidential undertone.

Yes, Dudley Wilburn! Clare thought. Whenever it wasn't the doctor, it was Dudley Wilburn: in her private pantheon Aunt Cathie must always erect some male idol to whose oracle all the problems of life should be submitted; and though the monitory cult of "the doctor" still formed the basis of her religion, the new revelation of his successor was now more often quoted. Whenever she expounded the gospel according to Dudley, Aunt Cathie glowed with a fierce and righteous conviction. As Clare saw her now, the autumnal firelight playing on her weathered cheeks, illuminating the furrow that the agony of innumerable headaches had graved, like a scar, between her brows, and the undeniable moustache that had replaced the shadow that once bloomed her upper lip, she couldn't suppress a vague wonder at the transformation which twelve years had wrought in the appearance of the Aunt Cathie whom she remembered in her childhood. That sanguine, prepotent figure had somehow reached another stage in the process of desiccation which finally must convert her into a little withered, tiresome old woman. Perhaps it was the tweed "cycling costume,"

with its bunched Norfolk jacket and mannish collar and tie, which Aunt Cathie had adopted, together with the surviving Miss Abberley, that made her look as if she had shrunk. Certainly, except in those moments when the thought of Lady Hingston stiffened her, she was softer and kinder now than she had ever been. And her devotion to Steven, dear thing, was strangely touching.

"So that," Aunt Cathie ended triumphantly, "is the considered opinion of a sane, impartial mind."

Silence. "You see, Aunt Cathie, Ralph was at Eton," Clare heard herself reply. "So, somehow, it seems natural . . ."

"My darling Clare," she answered, with disarming tenderness, "Steven is your own child; but sometimes I can't help feeling he's a little mine as well. I think I ought to tell you that I've altered my will. Dudley Wilburn very kindly helped me to do so the other day; a codicil, I think they call it. Of course I realize that both of you are quite well provided for; but that makes no difference to the sentiments, and so I've left everything to Steven."

"Oh, dear, dear Aunt Cathie, that's very sweet of you."

"Well, we can't expect to live for ever, my darling, and you and Steven are all I have in the world. Poor old Thirza's failing very fast." She pursed the shadowed lip determinedly, distrustful of emotion. "Of course there won't be very much," she went on: "Just Pen House and my little income and all the doctor's things—I couldn't bear to feel that those might fall into the hands of strangers; he was so particular about them."

"I wish you wouldn't think of such things, my dear; I'm sure you needn't," Clare told her.

Aunt Cathie smiled courageously and shook her head, for she knew better. "Now I must be trotting," she said. "No, no,

of course, you mustn't. I'm still quite capable of looking after myself. No, Clare, I won't allow it. Kiss Steven for me. I do hope I shan't meet any more of those dreadful motor-cars."

3

SIMPLICES SICUT COLUMBÆ

 ${f S}_{
m HE}$ went, From the drawing-room window Clare watched the red eve of Aunt Cathie's lamp turn the corner of the drive. In the outer stillness she heard the bicycle bell tingle; for although the drive was certainly, and the lanes most probably, empty, she knew that Aunt Cathie would go on ringing it all the way back to Wychbury.

As she left the window, and sat down gazing at the fire a restlessness stole over her. Such moods were rare, but this one was of a kind that she could not easily overcome, though she despised herself for giving way to it. She turned on the light; but even the familiar aspect of Annabel Ombersley's room could not restore her. There was something unquiet and threatening in the air that evening which had crept into it with her sudden realization of the physical change in Aunt Cathie and the ominous mention of Aunt Cathie's will. As she sat before the fire, with her hands to her eyes, she felt suddenly, unreasonably, desperately lonely; and to this unaccountable mood was added the prospect of the more definite loneliness which must fall on her when Steven went away to school. Perhaps that was the real explanation of all her discomfort; the central problem which she had shirked but must now face.

"It isn't the first time I've been lonely," she told herself,

"and yet, so far, I've always been able to get over it."

Seeking for consoling precedents she remembered the days when first she had come back from Pen House to Uffdown after Ralph's death. Those, surely, had been of a deeper lone-liness than any other she was likely to encounter in life, and yet she had survived them. She remembered the determination—at this distance rather pathetic—with which she had set her life in order. "He loved Uffdown," she had told herself, "so now it is my duty to keep everything just as he would have wished it when he was alive until the day when Steven is old enough to take his place." And in this piety she had found a vocation that had filled her mind and absorbed her body's activities.

At first she had been transported by the idea of keeping the land and the stables running exactly as Ralph had planned them; his desk in the gun-room was full of notes and account-books in which the last entries of his boyish hand seemed to have been blotted only yesterday; but as she came to deal with them, even when the admirable Bissell returned from the war, she found that she was losing money heavily for the sake of a sentiment. The figures in her bank-book frightened her; for Ralph had always laughed at her bad business head and excluded her from this part of their life.

One day, in a panic, she had called in Sir Joseph Hingston, who had showed her, in a few moments, her own incapacity.

"You see, my dear," he explained, "you've been trying to do what even a man can only accomplish with special aptitude and training. Bissell may very well be an excellent stud-groom and Watkins an admirable bailiff; but you can't run dairies and stud-farms without the management being in the hands of the man who foots the bill. As it happens there's no harm done; there's no reason why you shouldn't pay for this expensive

hobby if you want to; but if you imagine you can make a success of it, you're mistaken; and the anxiety of making a failure of it will turn you grey in no time, which is the very last thing we want."

"I know you're right; but I must do something," she pleaded.

"If you did properly half what you've been doing now you'd have your hands full," he assured her. He glanced at her, charitably amused. "There's the house and the garden. . . . Bless my soul, they're both big enough! What about making a rockery? I'll send you over some alpines from Stourford.

Then, for his thoughts were already back in the smoke of Wolverbury, he put his hand in his breast-pocket absentmindedly and wrote her a cheque, this action being his habitual panacea for all human ills.

From that moment, her career as the complete landowner frustrated, she had concentrated her energies into a narrower sphere. The alpines duly arrived from Stourford; the garden was planned and replanned; between the sandstone boulders of the rockery in spring poured her cascades of aubretia and sweet alyssum; in sheltered crevices gentian, starch-hyacinth and chinodoxa mocked with their living blue the surly Midland winter; within the box-edged borders, beyond the rosemary hedge of such sweet memory, new generations of roses bloomed and fell in June; and Ernest, Dudley Wilburn's bachelor brother, infected her with the passion for carnations which had given him his nickname in the North Bromwich clubs.

A sweet, a leisurely, an engrossing duty; for no garden that was ever planted has yet been brought to the gardener's ideas of perfection. In every season of the year the birth of some shy, new, lovely creature claimed her care and repaid it a hundredfold. There was something in the gentleness of these new charges,

their dependence, their rewarding gratitude, that softened the passage of seasons and of years by a promise always to be fulfilled. As Clare knelt beside them, the trowel grasped in the clumsy fingers of her coarse gardening-gloves, listening to the laughter of Steven that echoed, as he played, from those old walls, or guessing by some maternal seventh sense that he was standing with held breath beside her, she sometimes lost all consciousness of time, and only knew that she was alive and happy. These green things grew as Steven himself was growing, continually, imperceptibly. Sufficient for each day was its own miracle.

It was not that she had forgotten Ralph: only that his memory, as it grew more indefinite, had diffused itself into a faded yet mellower benevolence; so that often when she returned to the house, with Steven hanging and chattering on her arm, the gallant Sargent portrait seemed to smile down upon them both with the friendly gaiety of that eternal youth in which its features had been fixed, and Clare, meeting that frank and boyish gaze, could smile back with her pride in Steven, and without tears.

No, no, she told herself as she sat and gazed into the fire that evening; in all those years, except the very first, most dreadful ones, she'd never been really lonely. She mustn't allow herself to give way; Ralph would be ashamed of her. To-morrow she must plant those new bulbs—babianas, were they?—that Sir Joseph had sent her; a present from one of his engineering friends in Johannesburg. South Africa . . . Strange how this evening, wherever she turned her thoughts by way of escape, they should run up against these reminders of time and of mortality! No, never lonely, she affirmed, and now the worst was over, long ago.

"It's right and necessary that he should go to school," she

told herself. A manly school, as Aunt Cathie said. Manly: the word was just; yet it spelt the beginning of the end. From the first moment of his going Steven would be lost to her. Ten years. They had passed like a short dream; already the eleventh was hurrying on its way. In another ten, another space of dreaming, he would be a man, a lover, married perhaps. And that was a woman's life, she told herself. So short! Was there nothing more?

The clock in the hall, the Wolverbury work-people's wedding-present, rehearsed the Westminster chimes, then paused, and solemnly tolled six. It seemed to her that this lifeless piece of machinery was signalling a definite stage in her life: a halting place-alas, there was no halting!-rather the beginning of a new phase. Six o'clock. In another two minutes at most Steven would be with her demanding the attentions of that precious hour before bedtime to which he looked forward all day. Sometimes she must read to him, sometimes tell him stories, with the growing weight of his body pressed on hers, of which it never more surely seemed a part. Sometimes he would command her to play to him: all through his life she had hoped to make her music part of him as well, the best of all music blended into the fibre of his mind. She knew that his ear was good, for often they would sing the Scott-Gatty nursery-songs together, herself with lowered voice listening for the clear, thin notes of his. Like a little lamb, a baby thrush, she thought; and when he took his breaths in the wrong places she could have eaten him all up. Her lips smiled as she thought of it.

Found in the garden, dead in . . . his beauty.

Ah, that a lin . . . net should die in the . . . Spring!

Children shouldn't be taught to sing about death!

Come out, dear Dolly, and . . . make a snow . . . man!

That was better. Ten years . . . "I'm actually twenty-nine," she thought: "much, much older than Ralph was when he left me, and yet, in spirit, I'm not so very much older than Steven—certainly very little older than when I left St. Monica's." Was it possible that human beings never realized when they grew old? Did that account for Aunt Cathie's pathetic sprightliness. "In another ten years," she thought, "I shall be as old as Aunt Cathie used to be, and in a few more, probably, I shall have a moustache like hers. Vivien has one already, and Vivien's not much older than me. I hardly ever see dear Vivien now. Vivien's like Ralph was; she has this passion for breeding things—Clydesdales or retrievers, it's all the same. If only she'd married, as she could have done a dozen times, all that precious energy wouldn't be wasted on those foolish puppies, even though they are darlings at first."

That school business. . . . However far it might wander, her mind returned to it. "I'm not going to be bullied," she told herself, "by Mother Hingston or Aunt Cathie or anyone else. I shall decide by myself; or if I ask anyone's advice, it shall be Dudley Wilburn's. Yes, that is better. I think I'll get it over and speak to him to-night after dinner."

The idea of submitting her problem to Wilburn, even though it couldn't mitigate the ache inherent in it, was consoling and enabled her to dismiss it, for a moment, from her mind. As one of the trustees under her husband's will he usually made a point of calling in at Uffdown to see her whenever business took him to Wychbury. All through the years of her widowhood, his tact, his understanding, his keen but wholly unobtrusive interest in her affairs had established him, almost without her knowing it, in a position only a little less oracular than that which he occupied in Aunt Cathie's eyes; and even

though she smiled at Aunt Cathie's paroxysms of hero-worship their steady persistence had an effect of suggestion on her mind. Whenever she found herself in danger of being torn to pieces between the opposing forces of Stourford and Pen House, the way of least resistance and satisfaction seemed to lead her in the direction of this benevolent neutral of whom both sides approved. Little by little she had come to rely, far more than she suspected, upon his judgment, not only because he offered her a way of escape, but because the solid but kindly impassivity of his professional manner, which, in the old days at Pen House, had been sufficient to impress her grandfather, had now settled into a composure so judicial that it seemed natural to accept his judgments with complete confidence in their wisdom and impartiality.

That Clare, in her lonely dependence, should have found Wilburn impressive was not surprising; for time, and the nature of his profession, which carried with it the constant obligation of prudence, level-headedness, and secrecy, had confirmed and emphasized the physical characteristics which had made his early reputation.

The appearance of Dudley Wilburn, at forty-six, was everything which that of a prominent family lawyer should be. His tall and sturdy figure had thickened into middle-age; with no less strength, it had gained a certain solidity which made his movements more calculated. His face, always clean-shaven, had scarcely aged at all, though the furrows of slow, deliberate concentration added a new squareness to a mouth which had always seemed determined, and a powerful chin. His hair, which had receded slightly to the brow's advantage, was still coarse and vigorous, but of an iron-grey that made more striking, by contrast, the steady light in his eyes. An Atlas, who

carried on his shoulders half the cares of the North Bromwich business community, yet bore them so easily and with such reserves of strength that fear and solicitude both gave way to admiration.

It was the consciousness of these matters, weighty beyond all comparison with the small domestic problems that troubled her, that made Clare shy and diffident of consulting Wilburn when he came to Uffdown. The memory of his predominant position at Pen House had made her always a little afraid of him; yet, as soon as the ice of his formal arrival was broken and she had grown used to the measured scrutiny of Wilburn's eyes, she invariably took courage, only to find him more simple, more interested, more sympathetic than any of her other advisers. Over and over again she marvelled at his patience, his gentleness. Indeed, but for the gratuitous sense of triumph the admission would have given to Aunt Cathie, who, on the strength of it, would have ridden over her as ruthlessly as Lady Hingston's Juggernaut, Clare would have been ready to confess her belief in the oracle's validity as implicitly as Aunt Cathie herself.

The idea of submitting the problem of Steven to Wilburn's judgment was so reassuring that she had almost forgotten Steven himself. She bent down and looked at her watch in the firelight. It was ten past six. Whatever excitements detained him Steven was never late for this one, precious hour. Her old discomfort took a new and sinister shape. Where was he? What had happened to him? Monstrous ideas of accidents filled her mind. As she approached the door the turning of the handle brought a reflux of blood to her fluttered heart.

"Why, there you are!" she cried. "My darling, wherever have you been?"

4

PRUDENTES UT SERPENTES

THE door opened. It was not Steven.

"Oh, Miss Pidgeon," Clare said, "you quite startled me! Haven't you finished tea? It's nearly a quarter-past six."

"We have had no tea: I have put Steven in his bedroom," Miss Pidgeon answered with a tremulous voice. "I have locked him in his bedroom, Mrs. Hingston. Here is the key. I think you had better take it and deal with him. I can do no more. . . ." She thrust the bedroom key into Clare's hand.

Her voice was so strained that Clare herself was genuinely distressed by it. She took Miss Pidgeon's arm and closed the door gently behind her.

"Do come in and sit down," she said, "and tell me all about it. I'd no idea that you'd been so unhappy. If I'd known, I shouldn't have allowed it. Why, your hand's quite cold! Come nearer to the fire."

Miss Pidgeon obeyed her in silence. She sat down, upright, in an easy chair, her cold hands clasped before her; the silver plates of her belt expanded and closed like the armour of a rhinoceros with her shallow, rapid breathing; behind her spectacles tears glimmered in the firelight.

"I think," she said, "that Steven has completely lost his head."

"What do you mean, Miss Pidgeon?"

"I mean," said Miss Pidgeon, marking each adjective with a nervous movement of her clasped hands, "I mean that he is naughty, disobedient, wilful, wicked, and profane." "Profane?"

"Oh dear, Mrs. Hingston, don't let us go into details. I don't think I can bear to do so. My nerves have been so on edge that if I talk about it I'm sure I shall break down. You've been awfully sweet to me; nobody could have been sweeter; but, after this evening, I don't feel I can stay here another day. If you can find some other lady to look after him I shall be much obliged."

Her lips quivered like a guinea-pig's; she put her hands to her eyes.

"My dear Miss Pidgeon," Clare said, "you mustn't upset yourself. Try to be calm, and tell me exactly what happened. I must confess that I hadn't noticed anything wrong myself."

"Oh no, you wouldn't," said Miss Pidgeon passionately. "He's too clever. He takes good care of that. If you scold him now, he'll be sweet as honey. You'll find him more innocent than a baby, with those blue eyes; and yet I can tell you, all the time, his thought are the thoughts of a grown man."

"Yes?" Clare encouraged her, softly.

"I can't possibly keep pace with him," Miss Pidgeon went on. "The moment my eyes leave him he disappears and I have to spend hours and hours in hunting for him. It's so humiliating for a woman in my position to go round asking the servants if they've seen him ten times a day. Usually he finds his way to the stables—I think the men encourage him. This evening, when tea had been spoiling on the schoolroom table for half an hour, I went to search for him and found him hiding in the loft. I knew he was there because the dog barked. And when I called to him to come down . . ." Miss Pidgeon stopped, speechless with agitation, then, gulping, recovered herself: "I've been called a fool before, Mrs. Hingston, not only by him; and perhaps, in some people's eyes, I am one. If I weren't, I shouldn't

have put up with this so long. I've swallowed many insults of one kind and another in my life. But never, never, never before, Mrs. Hingston, have I been called a silly old bitch!"

Miss Pidgeon shivered as she pronounced the awful word, and Clare, for all her genuine concern, found it difficult to suppress a smile. Obviously there was very little to be said. She rose, and patted Miss Pidgeon's shoulder.

"Of course that was very wrong of him," she said. "You'd better stay here quietly and get warm while I go and deal with him."

She left Miss Pidgeon sitting as stiffly as though she had been frozen, and went slowly upstairs. The Sargent portrait surveyed her with humorous, quizzical eyes, as though it knew that she had no clear idea of what she was going to say to Steven. One thing, at least, was clear: the little monkey, by this last outrage, had unconsciously forced her hand. Providentially, too, in a way; for, as Aunt Cathie had cunningly suggested, Miss Pidgeon's voluntary retirement would save her from the evasive awkwardness of a dismissal. "What cowards we are!" she thought; then: "Of course I shall have to give her a handsome present when she goes." Stourford: Sir Joseph's cheque-book panacea!

She made her way through her own bedroom to Steven's door. The monkey had bolted it on his own side.

"Steven," she called. "Open the door at once."

No answer.

"Steven! Open the door! Obey me!"

Strange that the resistance of so small a creature should flutter her like this! A moment before she had been smiling patronizingly at Miss Pidgeon's agitation. She heard his small bare feet patter over the wooden floor. He opened the door, in his ridiculous striped pyjamas, and stood his ground like a Highland

bull-calf, the fair hair tousled over his determined eyes. He was so small, so stubborn, that the position was almost comical. She had to force herself to see no humour in it.

He was obstinately silent. She had seen that look in Ralph's eyes when Starlight refused a jump.

"Miss Pidgeon tells me that you've been wickedly rude to her," she said.

"Then Miss Pidgeon's a sneak," said Steven.

"She's nothing of the sort, Steven. She's your governess, and it's your duty to obey her and behave properly. What were you doing in the stables at tea-time?"

"I was watching Bo-peep have her tea first. Everybody ought to be kind to animals."

"You weren't kind to Miss Pidgeon, were you? And you weren't in the stable either. You were up in the loft. I've told you a hundred times that those stairs aren't safe."

"As a matter of fact," he explained, "there was a rat there. Sly heard it and went up first; so I had to go and protect her."

"Oh no, you didn't. You know quite well that Sly can look after herself. You were hiding from Miss Pidgeon. I can't allow you to do things like that, Steven. It's very naughty of you. I'm very glad that Miss Pidgeon sent you to bed without your tea. You deserved it."

"I wasn't hungry, thank you, mummy, so it was all right. May I come down now?"

"Most certainly not. I haven't finished talking to you yet. When Miss Pidgeon found you in the loft you refused to come down and called her a most dreadful name."

"I'm sure she's mistaken, mummy." A bland, angelic innocence filled Steven's eyes. "I can't think what you mean."

"Now, Steven, it's no good gazing at me like that. You know quite well that you're not telling the truth, which makes it

worse than ever. You'd better think again, before I get more angry with you. Think carefully. You called her a silly old . . ."

"Oh, that, mummy. Of course I remember. I was speaking to Sly, not to Miss Pidgeon."

"Steven, Steven, you mustn't tell lies like this, or I can't pos-

sibly love you."

"You see, dearest," he explained, "she had her nose in a little hole in the boards and was scratching away like mad. It was silly of her, mum, and she is an old bitch."

"No, Steven, I don't believe you."

"She is, mum, truly. You ask Bissell if she isn't."

"You know quite well that I don't mean that, Steven. In any case, 'bitch' is a horrible, disgraceful word."

"Why, mum? It sounds all right."

"And in any case, you're only making excuses. You must apologize to Miss Pidgeon, and if ever I hear of you using that word again I shall punish you most severely. Do you understand?"

"I suppose I do, mum," he answered sullenly. Then he pounced on her like a small whirlwind and clung to her. "Now I may kiss you, mayn't I?" he whispered.

In a flush of emotion that masked her sense of cowardice she picked him up and kissed him. He snuggled his soft cheek

against hers.

"And now, mum," he whispered again, in conscious, babyish tones, "mayn't I come down into the drawing-room, just as I am? Only for ten minutes, mummy darling?"

The thought of poor Miss Pidgeon, whom her conscience showed her still sitting in anguish before the drawing-room fire, made Clare refuse when she would gladly have yielded.

"No, no, it's far too late," she said, "and, besides, you're

still in disgrace, until you've apologized to Miss Pidgeon."
"You might ring for her," he suggested, lordily. "Then I could get it over."

Clare hid a smile. "You'd better get back to bed," she said. "I've no more time to waste on you; I've got to dress for dinner."

"In that case I'd better watch you dress." he said.

"I oughtn't really to let you; but if you'll promise to be good . . ."

"Of course I will, darling."

He quickly established himself at the foot of her bed, and as she wrapped the golden eiderdown about his shoulders she thought how little and precious his body was, nestled, like that of a small, warm-blooded animal, inside the billowy silk, and had to hug him and kiss him again, unasked; and Steven, knowing that he had got round her and was forgiven, became all sweetness and gentleness incarnate, watching her in silence as she stood, like a little girl, in her chemise, and swept the swishing comb through her dark hair.

That evening, out of compliment to Wilburn and her own beauty, which in this moment of reconciliation, seemed more pleasing than usual to her eyes, she had chosen a flounced dinner-frock of primrose taffetas with a band of cherry-coloured velvet narrowing the waist. It gave her joy to wear it; for at Uffdown, of late years, her pretty clothes had been wasted on the eyes of servants. The end of the skirmish with Steven and Miss Pidgeon had left her in a state of relieved excitement, in which she was glad to see her slim shape flash across the surface of the oval Chippendale mirror; an old perfume of youth seemed to envelop her. When she had given the last bloom to her toilet and turned to put Steven to bed, she found him staring at her with wide blue eyes.

"Oh, mum, how lovely you are!" he said.

The spontaneity of the compliment made her laugh.

"You never say pretty things like that to poor Miss Pidgeon."

"But then she isn't," he answered, with irrefutable logic.

"Come along then and kiss me good-night," she said, "because mother won't be able to come up after dinner to-night."

"Why won't you, mum?" he asked reluctantly.

"Because somebody's coming to dinner."

"Who's coming?" he persisted.

"Mr. Wilburn. Now hurry up, darling."

"Mr. Wilburn? Oh, mummy!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I don't like him, mum, really."

"Oh, Steven, don't be silly. Come along."

"He looks at me so."

"Well, there's no reason why he shouldn't look at you if he wants to."

"No"—doubtfully—"I suppose there isn't. But I don't like him."

She smiled: "I suppose you're shy. That's not like you, Steven."

"When he comes to dinner, mum, you're all different."

"Ridiculous child! Of course I'm not."

"And you don't kiss me good-night."

"You don't deserve it this evening, after being so naughty. I suppose I shall have to carry you to bed. Be quick."

"No. I don't want you to carry me. I'm too old. Oh, I do wish he wasn't coming."

"Steven, Steven, I do believe you're jealous!"

She put her arm round him and shepherded him to bed. He was silent; a puzzled unhappiness clouded his eyes. Her heart was between laughing and crying at his quaint unreasonable-

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ness; all her emotions were very near to the surface that evening.

"Now turn over and go to sleep at once," she whispered with her lips on his, "and promise me that when you wake up tomorrow you'll be mother's good boy. Promise?"

And she gave him a kiss that was longer than any lover's.

5

DEUS EX MACHINA

 $m W_{ILBURN}$ awaited her in the chair where she had left Miss Pidgeon freezing an hour before. Clare came into the room so lightly that he didn't hear her; but the downward tilted mirror over the mantelpiece showed her his face, so lined, so heavily serious in the flicker of firelight that the sight of it checked the flood of her happiness, brimmed to overflowing with Steven's kiss. In a moment her gay mood faltered, the joy of her elegance lost its brightness; her high spirits fluttered earthward like a newly-hatched butterfly whose blooms are dashed by rain. That mirrored face showed such anxiety that her own elation seemed a selfish impertinence. She wondered what had distressed him and wished that she might share his trouble. Yet, when he rose to greet her, it seemed as if the firelight had played a trick on his eyes; his hand-clasp was as firm, his slow smile as kindly and serene as ever; his serious eyes were quick to notice her brilliant dress.

"Why, Clare," he said, "I needn't ask you how you are. You're very beautiful to-night. Am I to flatter myself that all this magnificence is in honour of me? If it is, I'm afraid I can't live up to it. Turn round, and let me look at you."

She obeyed him, like a little girl displaying her party-frock, smiling over her shoulder into his judicial eyes. Even now she couldn't be quite sure of him; a little, timid doubt underlay her innocent coquetry, and begged for his approval.

"Quite overwhelming." He gave her a mocking bow, "What is the matter with you this evening? I've never seen you look better in my life."

"What is the matter with you, Dudley?" she answered. "I saw you before you caught sight of me. There's something wrong. It's very sweet and brave of you to pretend there isn't; but between old friends like ourselves . . ."

He stopped her with a laugh. "My dear Clare, you're far too clever. Also I'm far too fond of you, and far too tactful by habit, to dream of asking you to give me your professional opinion on all the briefs that I've prepared for the assizes. Of course I know that you're an authority on Company Law. Perhaps, after dinner, you'll spare me five minutes of serious . . ."

"Ah, now you're laughing at me," she broke in. "I don't feel like being teased to-night. I want five serious minutes with you as well. But that can wait till after dinner too. Don't let's be serious just vet. So I was mistaken? Do tell me, Dudley, vour face quite worried me."

"My dear child," he smiled, "if you only knew what a fag these blessed assizes are, with a crotchety judge and the Shirehall full of the smell of hops!"

"So it wasn't anything special after all?" She laid her hand on his arm.

The butler's announcement that dinner was served absolved him from the duty of answering. He stepped aside to give her passage to the door, and by the time they were seated in the redlighted isolation of the dinner-table the question was forgotten and Clare found herself talking of matters less intense. Under the comforting influence of his whisky-and-soda Wilburn's detachment resumed its usual benevolence and the shadow that had fallen between them lifted. Consoling herself for the remains of her concern Clare remembered that he was always what Ralph would have called a slow starter; that, however often or rarely they met, Wilburn's reserve made him seem like a stranger at first—an obstacle that made it all the more delightful when time discovered him to be unchanged.

For half an hour they talked of happy, unimportant things; old memories and present gossips of Clare's narrow world. She told him Aunt Cathie's story of the new Hingston juggernaut. He laughed, but behind his laughter a look of pain or concentration showed itself in his eyes at the mention of Aunt Cathie's name, so that when she went babbling on he seemed no longer to be listening to her. Then, suddenly, he changed the subject.

"We wanted to ask each other something, Clare," he said. "Five minutes, wasn't it? Time's getting on, so, as a lady, I think you'd better have first go."

He pushed back his chair and sat looking at her as though he were behind his office desk at North Bromwich, and Clare's own face grew serious.

"It's Steven," she said. "You know we've never talked of this before; but now, I think, something will have to be done with him. Aunt Cathie and his grandmother, for once, are in agreement. They both say that he ought to go to school. Of course I can't bear the thought of it; but I suppose they're right. I know I spoil him; I simply can't help it. But I mustn't go on spoiling him for ever: it wouldn't be fair."

Wilburn nodded slowly. "Let me see. . . . How old is he?" "Ten . . . and two months. Time passes so quickly."

"Terribly quickly. Nobody realizes that, Clare, more than I

do. Of course he's been doing lessons of some kind with Miss What-d'-you-call-her?"

"Miss Pidgeon. But Steven carries far too many guns for her. He's dreadfully precocious and clever. That's part of the trouble. This evening Miss Pidgeon gave me notice: the poor thing wouldn't have done that unless she felt pretty strongly."

"Why did she give notice?"

Clare laughed softly as the vision of Miss Pidgeon's indignation rose before her eyes. "Steven was quite disgraceful: he called her a bitch."

And Wilburn's serious mouth was switched into a smile: "Of all the epithets I might have thought of for Miss Pidgeon I think that's one of the last I should have chosen."

"I'm afraid it's Bissell. Lady Hingston gave him a pony. Cathie says it's all her fault."

"Of course she does. But I think they're both right about the other matter: school, I mean."

"I knew you would," Clare told him. "I wonder if you would make some enquiries for me."

"I'll begin them to-morrow."

"You see, Dudley," she went on, "as usual I'm between two fires, and you're so beautifully neutral. If I sent Steven to some place preparatory for Rugby, where the doctor went, his grand-mother would be indignant. And if I sent him to Cheam, I should never hear the last of it from poor Aunt Cathie. You see she thinks Steven is absolutely her property. She was telling me only this afternoon about the will that you'd made for her."

"Yes." Once again that painful look came into Wilburn's eyes. He sat staring in front of him for a moment of distressful silence in which all the comfort that Clare had gathered from him vanished.

"I suppose I'd better tell you what's happened, Clare," he said.

He paused, as though seeking for words in which to put his announcement, and Clare, hanging uncomfortably on his silence, wondered what was coming. Among these fantastic speculations one outbid all others: Wilburn was going to marry Aunt Cathie! Strange, after all these years; strange, and for some inexplicable reason disquieting. Yet, why should he hesitate to tell her? His voice, with a queer, emotional hardness, interrupted her surmises:

"The truth of the matter is that Aunt Cathie has nothing to leave him. I only heard of it this evening: it must have happened about the time when she was with you. All your Aunt Cathie's money is in the Sedgebury Main. The old man put it there on my advice. And the Sedgebury Main's under water, done for."

Clare gasped: "The Sedgebury Main? I can't believe it. We were always told that nothing could be safer. You mean it's failed? I don't think I understand."

"I mean what I say," he answered impatiently. "Water. Suddenly. It came like a flood. It's the biggest mining disaster we've had in the district for years. God knows how many lives and half a million of money swamped in an hour. Of course we don't know the worst or the best of it yet. The evening paper in Worcester had the first report."

"They can't do anything?"

"Not with water on this scale. It's up to the higher levels already; billions of tons of it. It isn't easy to realize at first. I'm hard hit myself, and so are most of my friends; but it's the little people like your Aunt Cathie who'll suffer most. At this moment, apart from her balance in the bank and Pen House, the poor soul hasn't a farthing in the world. Do you know, Clare, when I heard the news in Worcester, she was the first person I

thought of? I feel that I'm responsible. It was I who persuaded the old man to go into Sedgebury Main. He fought against it. I can remember him as if it was vesterday. 'I like to see my money on the top of the earth': that's what he said. Well, he was right. We put our money on Furnival. Furnival's a big man; I still believe in him; but Furnival can't fight against the waters that are under the earth."

For a moment they gazed at each other in silence. No wonder he looked worried, Clare thought. What a light-headed little fool he must have thought her in her primrose frock! and poor Aunt Cathie . . . More pathetic than any vision of piteous drowned bodies floating in grimv abvsses or widows wailing at the pit-head was that of Aunt Cathie pedalling back to Wychbury through the dark lanes with her bicycle-bell tingling all the time for company, and, in her heart, the triumph of having left her little fortune to Steven. For Clare that was the intimate, the representative tragedy in which the vaster implications of the unknown were concentrated and made real.

"Oh, the poor darling," she cried, "It was so little, Dudley, and she thought so much of it; she was so proud of having been able to leave her money to Steven. Dudley, can't we keep it from her?"

"No, no, my dear. She reads the papers. She'll find it in the evening edition of the Courier-probably much exaggerated. I'm afraid she'll have seen it by now. That's why I want to leave you early, Clare. I should like to call at Pen House and make the best of it on my way home."

"Yes, yes. Of course you must do that. But, Dudley, do you think she'll realize at once what it means? Is there any real reason why she should know about her losses? Couldn't we . . ."

He shook his head. In her urgency Clare laid her hand upon

his arm. "Of course, it's easy!" she cried. "Why didn't I think of it before? I know dreadfully little about these things, but I have money, haven't I? All the money that's paid into the bank every quarter: I'm sure I don't spend half of it. All Aunt Cathie's business is in your hands, isn't it?" He nodded. "Then, of course, it's as easy as can be. Listen: I'll tell you what happened. Last month, or the month before-you'll have to be careful about dates-you sold out all Aunt Cathie's Sedgebury Main. You sold them to me at the market price; although, of course, Aunt Cathie must never know who bought them. If I haven't enough money in the bank to pay for them, you must lend me some—you will trust me, won't you?—and the beauty of it is, you see, that nobody will be any the worse for it. All my money is for Steven, and anything that I pay to Aunt Cathie will come back to him. Isn't that splendid? Doesn't it work out wonderfully?"

He stood, smiling gravely at her passionate illogicality, and, all the time, his mind was haunted by memories of another scene: the evening when he had read the doctor's will at Pen House; the face of Aunt Cathie, shrunken and shattered, in the doctor's chair; the suffering voice pleading for Clare as Clare now pleaded for her.

"Nobody need know a word about it but you and me. Isn't that so?"

The voice was Clare's; but the words were Aunt Cathie's, reshaping themselves like phantoms that can only take form in ether charged by present human emotion. As ghosts his own words returned to answer hers, forming themslves automatically on his lips like those of an actor which come, without thought, to answer the cue in a part which he has played and forgotten many years before:

"Of course it's quite possible."

"And so easy," she persisted.

He laughed. "Well, hardly that. You speak as if altering dates and cooking accounts were part of my ordinary routine of business. You don't appear to realize that I'm a respectable lawyer."

"But nobody need know except ourselves. That is the beauty of it."

"That's always the beauty of compounding felonies until they're found out. Then people think they're ugly. Of course the whole disgraceful business must be thought out. It's just as well to remember I'm your trustee. I'm not an expert in criminal methods; but if you're determined to finance the crime . . ." He stopped.

"Dudley, if she's not to suffer dreadfully something ought to be done at once, oughtn't it?"

"You can leave it to me, Clare."

"My dear, you're a good friend," she whispered, clasping his hand.

"Ah, Clare, don't say so. It's you who are good, my child." His hand tightened on hers.

This sudden emanation of feeling from a voice in which she had never heard such tones before, aroused, in Clare's tense mind, vibrations of an answering emotion, adding to the trust and admiration with which she had always regarded Wilburn a tenderness that made these clamour for expression. In this wave of sympathy she realized, with shame, how much she owed him already, how unworthy of the generosity to which she pretended had been her return. Now with the impulse to give at its richest and strongest, she felt it an almost physical necessity to express what she felt.

"You put me to shame," she told him, "because what you say isn't really true. Good? I'm not good at all. I'm not good for

anything. It's only when things happen like this that I begin to realize how useless I really am."

"No, no," he told her, "you're wrong; you've been brave, you've been splendid."

She disregarded him: "All through these years since Ralph left me I've had everything done for me by you and poor Aunt Cathie and Lady Hingston. I can't even deal with Miss Pidgeon without bothering you. I've made no return whatever; just sponged on you. You're all so good to me that I've taken it for granted; I've never even thanked you. Ungrateful little beast! But I do thank you now, Dudley; heaven knows I'm not as ungrateful as I seem."

"Clare, Clare," he begged her, "you mustn't talk like this."

"I've got to. Somehow, to-day, so many things have happened. It feels as if the world were less solid than usual. I've been so happy and so miserable. What's going to happen next? I don't know where I am; I'm almost frightened." She paused. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, Dudley, making myself a nuisance again. I suppose it's really the thought of losing Steven. Of course I've known, all the time, that it had to come sooner or later. I've gone on pretending to myself that it wasn't true; but now that it has come I'm just a coward; I want to take back everything I've said to you. It makes me shiver when I think of this great big empty house and me all alone in it. It's loneliness that frightens me; and nobody can help me in that."

He answered her slowly: "My dear child, there's no reason why you should be lonely. There's no reason why you should stay here at Uffdown."

She laughed bitterly: "What can I do? D'you want me to go to Stourford to be bullied and patronized by Lady Hingston? There wouldn't be a soul in the place with whom I had any-

thing in common but Vivien and poor Marguerite, who have their own lives to live. Or Pen House? I love Aunt Cathie; but that's not the same as living with her. It's all very well to talk of moving. Where could I go?"

"To North Bromwich, Clare. With me."

"North Bromwich?" For a moment she could not grasp his meaning, and even when it came to her she couldn't believe it.

"If you would marry me, Clare. Heaven knows I love you."

She gazed at him in silence; and Wilburn, taking advantage of her stupefaction, continued rapidly: "My dear, don't think I've taken advantage of this disturbance to speak to you or that I've thought of it on the spur of the moment. I've been in love with you and nobody else but you for more than eleven years. I can tell you the moment it began: a night that you can't possibly remember, when we met on the station platform at Wychbury and drove up to Pen House together. You were too young for me to tell you then. I kept it all to myself until the day of your grandfather's funeral; and then I found I was too late—too late to think of marrying you, I mean; for I've gone on loving you from that day to this."

He stopped. Out of the tumult of her amazement Clare was recalled and harrowed by the anxiety in his face.

"Oh, Dudley," she said, "don't think I'm callous because I can't say anything. The idea's too strange . . . too big for me to grasp. If you'll be patient with me . . . For the moment I can't even think."

"My dearest," he smiled, "I've been patient for eleven years and can easily keep it up a little longer. I don't want to frighten you or hurry you in any way. I know I'm not the ideal of a romantic lover; but neither are you a child, although you look one. We've both of us known what it means to be bruised by life; we've both of us known the meaning of loneliness. I

shouldn't have dared to speak to you like this-though God knows how much I want you !-- if I hadn't felt that things were getting a little too complicated for you to deal with by yourself. And then there was Steven. I know how much he means to you: I don't imagine for one moment, Clare, that I can fill his place when he's separated from you; but I see-I've seen for long enough—that no woman, and least of all a mother, can be expected to deal with the kind of problem he's bound to offer you. If he's to be a man, he needs the influence of a man to make him one. And that's what I want to give you as well as the love you've always had. I want you to be happy and untroubled, my dearest. I'm speaking the literal truth when I say that that's the only thing I desire in life; and if you feel that I can't give you this peace and happiness"—he hesitated—"well, well, my dear, so much the worse for me, though that, of course, won't make any difference to my loving you as long as there's a breath in my body."

He turned away. She put out her hands to him:

"Dudley, will you forgive me if I can't say anything yet?"

"Forgive you, Clare? I love you."

"All that I owe you . . ."

"You owe me nothing at all. Twelve years ago I was a broken man. It's the thought of you and nothing else that has made life possible. I've come here as often as I dared, just because the joy of seeing you meant so much to me. I've come here with my heart beating like a boy's, and gone away telling myself that I'm a maudlin middle-aged fool for my pains. Even if you feel that the exchange is too unequal—as it is, of course—I shall go on worshipping you for the rest of my days. Whatever happens, you'll always be able to count on me. I won't say any more. There's nothing more to say. Let's talk of something else," he continued in a voice devoid of emotion. "Do you think

if I rang for Styles he could get Bissell to drive me over to Wychbury? This business of Aunt Cathie's will have to be dealt with."

For the moment she could not bring her brain to deal with matters so ordinary. Taking her permission for granted he rang the bell and sent his orders to the stable. Once more he stood before her in silence that compelled her to speak. She tried, but failed, to imitate his naturalness.

"May I write to you to-morrow?" she asked, almost timidly.

"To-morrow, the day after, whenever you like."

She held out her hand; he bent and pressed it with his lips. At that moment his strength, his goodness seemed so rare to her that she could have given him more.

"Good-bye," he said, and was gone.

6

GHOSTLY LOVES

SHE waited until she heard the front-door close behind him; then, like a cat that has been watching for the moment to escape, took refuge in the drawing-room. Her face, she knew, was burning with a stunned excitement. Nobody, not even the faithful Ellen, must see it to-night.

While they were dining, the butler had made up the fire with fir-logs from the coppice; it talked and chuckled to itself, shooting out resinous tongues of flame that licked the curved flanks of the Steinway with spurts of light and flying shadows. Clare stood motionless in the middle of the room, a small and lonely figure. Her heart was fluttering and flaring like the fir-

wood fire; like soft, enormous bats the shadows flickered over her.

"I am ridiculous," she told herself, "to feel so nervy. If I sit down quietly and play to myself I shall soon feel easier. I mustn't think about anything yet. I can't. There's plenty of time to-morrow."

Methodically, yet always dividedly conscious of her own movements and of her tremulous fingers, she lit two slender candles, one on either side of the music-rest. The thin flames dipped, and then burned steadily; they and their Georgian silver candlesticks shone deep into the lucid ebony, as though suspended upside-down in a peaty pool. She sat down at the piano, in her rustling taffetas. Her fingers lay upon the keyboard, pallid as the ivory keys. Wilburn had kissed her fingers. Not knowing how or why they shaped the first phrase of the Frauenlieben und Leben. The last note died away into silence.

"No, I can't play," she thought. "Why can't I play?"

In all those years, whenever she felt most lonely or out of tune with the world, it had been her solace to sit there at the piano and think of Ralph. This room, above all others, was sacred to those quiet thoughts, the piano itself a consolation, a refuge. To-night the place refused its consolations. Why?

Sitting there, powerless to answer this question, there came into her mind a memory of the day on which she had seen it first. Twelve years ago . . . They had bicycled over from Stourford, she and Ralph and Vivien, to take measurements for carpets and curtains in the empty house. Vivien had left them, laughingly dismissed on some ridiculous errand, and Ralph, as soon as Vivian's back was turned, had taken her in his arms and kissed her till she pleaded for breath. It was in this very corner, by the window, on the spot where she was sitting now.

She closed her eyes, half fearful, half wishing to remember;

then quickly repented. It was too late: the gates were open; she could not close them. The memory of that kiss invaded her; it made her shiver, as though a cold wind had blown out of the darkness into her heart. Behind it there came an endless drift of kisses: the first, on that night of flame, when the beacon had flared up in her heart and blinded her; innumerable secret kisses of their magic Spring; those wild, sweet, storm-snatched kisses of Italy: long lovers' kisses in the moon-drenched Capri night. Wherever she turned these treacherous memories haunted and pursued her, as though the dark, malignant wind were driving them into her brain. She started up in panic; she could bear it no longer.

"I can't stay here," she thought. "I shall go mad if I stay here."

She left the candles burning and fled incontinently upstairs to her bedroom.

"Steven is sleeping in Ralph's dressing-room," she thought. "I must be careful not to wake him, poor darling. If I had Steven in my arms I think I could feel happier. No, no, I mustn't give way."

She undressed hurriedly. The primrose frock lay stiffly on the sofa. Out of her mirror a frightened, frightening face surveyed her. She turned away quickly; she hated it; it was not her own. She switched off the light and huddled into the bedclothes.

"If only I could sleep," she thought.

But she could not sleep. Out of the darkened bedroom those memories of her old love returned to her; dead moments, marching in procession like the ghosts of armies broken in battle.

"Oh, Ralph, my darling," she whispered, "why do you torture me like this? What have I done to you . . . What have I done?"

In the first years of loneliness she had dreamed of him con-

stantly, night after night; of late such dreams had visited her rarely, evanescently, as though the original strength of his spirit were fading away, so that it could no longer find his way with certainty into her sleeping brain. Now, when he seemed to have found his way again, the image that came to her was strangely lifeless and blurred, less clear than anything in the scenes which it carried with it. In all this driven cloud-race of memory his was the only form that lacked distinctness. There was nothing real in it but Steven's eyes and the pink hunting-coat of the Sargent picture. To this painted shape, rather than to any form of her own imagining, she found herself pleading in the darkness; desperately, like some peasant woman who kneels before a plaster saint.

"What have I done?" she sobbed. "Oh, what are you thinking of me to-night?"

Vain question. The gallant portrait only smiled.

"Oh, Ralph, my darling, I shall never, never love anyone but you. But I am so lonely, Ralph, and you can't help me, my dearest. You mustn't ever think that I'm disloyal."

That she could even dream of marrying Dudley was a hateful disloyalty. Disloyalty to what? However she pleaded, the painted lips could only smile at her. Disloyalty to his memory? And what could he remember? To Steven, his perpetuation in the flesh? But it was in Steven's interest, above all others, that she must be disloyal. Steven disliked him. That was a childish whim, to be smiled at rather than taken seriously. Steven was determined. Ah, but he would outgrow it. A new disloyalty: to Uffdown, to Ralph's beloved Uffdown, the place that had been invented by and for their love? The panelled walls of the dark bedroom returned no answer; the lives and loves of passing mortals could not trouble them.

"No, there is nothing to bind me," she told herself; "these

loyalties that I've invented are unreal; they're ghosts, and I mustn't let them frighten me."

In all the world there was only one predominant reality, and that was Dudley Wilburn himself. Out of her shadowy uncertainties his figure emerged substantial as a welcome landfall. It was to him that she stretched her arms for salvation from the stormy night, and was comforted.

Now, thinking of what had passed between them, she began to wonder if she had not treated him badly. It seemed to her unfair to have sent him away without an answer, to have kept him waiting on her caprice as if he were an impetuous boy. Hadn't he waited long enough already, and didn't she already know enough about him to decide? Their friendship was of too long standing, her respect for him, her admiration too deep for such casual treatment. This man was no sudden and alarming stranger; the heart which he had opened to her by his avowal showed nothing with which she wasn't acquainted but this amazing love. Its steadfastness, its patience, its nobility; she knew them all-she had not been Aunt Cathie's pupil for nothing-and now, by asking her to marry him, this paragon of all the virtues, had shown her the greatest honour that it was in his power to offer. How many women of his acquaintance would give their eyes for the chance of taking it?

"But I don't love him," the obstinate thought returned. "No woman has a right to marry a man she doesn't love. What would he think if I began by telling him that? Would he be wounded, affronted?" No: he was too strong, too reasonable, too wise for that. Surely he would understand. Love was a thing apart, a miracle. And miracles were rare; once, perhaps, in a lifetime, if one were fortunate; but never again.

"And even in this we are equal," she told herself. "We are not children. Both of us have known what love means, and what it means to be treated roughly by life. We have our lives to live and must make the best of them. And I am tired of fighting; I've fought so long."

It seemed to her that she had always been fighting with one thing or another; with money, with Lady Hingston, with Aunt Cathie; with Steven, the servants, even poor Miss Pidgeon.

"I can't keep it up for ever," she thought, "and Dudley is so strong. Things that seem monstrous to me are just nothing to him. He can resolve everything for me; his mind's so clear and well-ordered, and now I shan't have to keep things worrying me until he comes to see me. He'll be there always, and life will be so simple. What he can give me is rest; I need it so badly; and if I'm not able to give him love in exchange . . . Who knows?"

The question was unanswerable.

"I must think no more about it," she told herself. "I must go to sleep, like a sensible woman. To-morrow . . . to-morrow morning early . . . I will write to him."

But, as she closed her eyes and put all thought behind her, Clare knew that she would marry Dudley Wilburn.

7

SEDGEBURY MAIN

YES, Dudley, I will marry you, she wrote to him next morning, but don't let us tell people anything about it until everything is settled; at any rate, until Steven has gone away to school. . . . How cautious, how cowardly I am! she thought, remembering how she had pleaded for secrecy long ago, in the days of Ralph's courtship. Then, perhaps, a maidenly modestly

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might have justified her shyness; but that a widow of twelve years' standing and the mother of a boy of ten should insist on these virginal reticences needed explanation. People will make such a dreadful fuss about it—she explained it as she wrote—and say such disturbing things that I'm sure it's healthier for them to wake up one morning and find it's all over. Then they can talk as much as they like, and I shan't mind. Don't you agree with me?"

Of course Wilburn agreed with her; he was too thankful for his good fortune, too elated by the long success of his careful tactics, to question anything. As long as he had won her, it mattered nothing to him what people said or didn't say; but as for gossip or interference, Clare might easily have set her fears at rest; for the moment one theme absorbed the thoughts and feelings of everyone inhabiting their small world—the disaster at the Sedgebury Main.

The morning paper, which Clare had left on one side to write her letter, was full of it. Even the North Bromwich Mail, that last rampart of Midland hard-headedness, cynicism and common-sense, conceded leaded headlines. Not only in the city itself but in every village and hamlet of the district the savings of small investors were involved; wild rumours, distorted and reinforced by every mouth through which they passed, fluttered hither and thither over the countryside. The disaster was not so much a catastrophe as a crime; experienced miners had warned the management that they were on dangerous ground; the villain of the piece, among a dozen others which included Sir Joseph Hingston, was the consulting engineer, that callous megalomaniac Furnival, a man who gambled with lives as his victims gambled with pence; the magnitude of the disaster had been exaggerated by the directors who were already secretly buying up the depreciated shares; the magnitude of the disaster

had been concealed by those same directors for fear of arousing the righteous indignation that they deserved; the roll of casualties reached fantastic figures that swung upwards and downwards like a barometer in a typhoon; each hour hatched out a swarm of harrowing circumstantial horrors spontaneously generated in hundreds of excited minds, rumours that buzzed like flies above a rotting carcase.

Yet nobody—not even the gaunt Furnival, stalking about with the light of battle in his eyes and his red mane flying like a banner, not even the rescue-gangs of volunteers, shivering on the hill-top like soldiers waiting for a barrage to lift; not even Sir Joseph Hingston, that plump little man, all pinched and pasty in his fur-lined coat, nor the haggard groups of women who hung together outside the barbed-wire fence with check shawls tightened round their suffering faces and children tugging at their bedraggled skirts—not one of them knew, with any certainty, the truth of what lay hidden in the sooty flood three hundred feet beneath them.

Nothing but time, that slow-footed monster, could reveal which men were dead, which ruined; which women widowed, which children orphaned. But down in the basin of the Black Country, from under the sooty haze that rose continually in smoke from furnace and factory and pit-head, then hung in the acrid air and settled on their denizens like a blight, men moving about their business and women standing slatternly at the doors of mine-cracked tenements, would see, above the western skyline, the twin, gaunt head-gear of the Sedgebury Main, now, and forever afterwards, known as Fatherless Bairn, and shudder, and turn again to their sordid tasks, hoping, by this distraction, to escape the thought of what new mischief the coalblack Moloch might have in store for them. Through all those days of waiting, when the wind whirled smoke and grit

into the upper regions of the sky, the sunsets over the ridge of Sedgebury were of a red and lurid magnificence, as though the motionless head-gear of Fatherless Bairn were a signpost jointing the way into the mouth of hell.

At Uffdown, sheltered under the Southern slope of the hills, these sinister signs could not be seen; and Clare in the confused emotions of her new orientation, was too absorbed to heed the reminders of the general excitement that the servants brought her. It was only in the late afternoon, when Aunt Cathie's bicycle came skimming over the drive like a solitary Mother Carev's chicken, and Aunt Cathie herself, most ludicrously flustered with her hat blown on one side, had kissed her with wind-cold lips, that she realized the significance of what Wilburn had told her the night before.

"What, Clare-do you mean to say you haven't heard? But didn't Dudley tell you, and haven't you read the papers? My dear, it seems to me you go through life like a parcel through the post. It's a tremendous thing-yes, yes, I'm dying for tea; I've been dashing all over the country; I had to tell Susan Abberley the news, the poor old thing's so out of itwhat was I saying? The most tremendous thing-and now I've scalded my tongue! More than two hundred lives to begin with. Mr. Hemus assures me it can't possibly be less. Too ghastly to think of! I'm sure the majority were married; those colliers always are, and have the most enormous families. If you think of two hundred widows and five children apiece"-she paused to multiply—"that makes two thousand, doesn't it?"

"Not quite." Clare smiled at the macabre wish that fathered Aunt Cathie's calculation.

"Well, anyway," Aunt Cathie declared, "that's near enough. It shows you, doesn't it? And then there's the money. I don't know what the capital was: somebody, I forget who it was, mentioned two million. So widely distributed too! There's scarcely anyone who hasn't a finger in it. People like Mr. Hemus at the station and poor Miss Pidgeon, poor souls! Gone, every penny of it! It's too tragic, isn't it? Of course," she went on cheerfully, "I'm one of the lucky ones—I suppose Dudley told you last night? It was so sweet of him to come over specially and set my mind at rest!—but when I think of the position that other people are left in and what I might have had to face, it leaves me quite breathless. I feel"—she paused, but immediately the current obsession supplied a parallel—"I feel as if I'd just escaped by the skin of my teeth from being run down by a motor-car." And that, at the moment, was exactly how she looked, Clare thought.

"But there are two things," Aunt Cathie continued solemnly, "that this dreadful business proves, and every moment makes them seem more remarkable. The first is what a marvellous brain the doctor had. You know, Clare, from the very first moment that the Sedgebury Main was floated, he forsaw exactly what would happen! I can't positively say that he mentioned the word water; but he knew, in that wonderful way of his, that the business wasn't sound. Naturally he was always suspicious of anything that the Hingstons had to do with. And then, of course, there's Dudley's cleverness. Upon my soul, it's almost uncanny! To think that more than a fortnight ago, at the very top of the broom, he put my Sedgebury Mains into Astill's Breweries! If he'd consulted me about it, I believe I should have been frightened by the change, though of course he knows what confidence I have in him. But doesn't that show what insight, what wisdom he has? I know that you always laugh at me in secret when I rave about him, Clare, but you've no excuse for doing that in future. No doubt, I could have managed to look after myself if the worst had happened; but it's Steven who would have suffered, bless his heart!"

So Dudley had pulled it off without arousing the innocent Aunt Cathie's suspicions. How splendid of him, Clare thought; how magnificently reliable he was!

"I don't think you're sufficiently impressed," Aunt Cathie persisted. She wouldn't be satisfied till Clare had subscribed to every article of her Wilburn cult; and Clare, who found a relief for her own feelings of admiration in confessing her orthodoxy, was so infected by Aunt Cathie's enthusiasm that she was almost ready to believe that the miracle by which Aunt Cathie had been saved was really and entirely due to Dudley's inspired foresight, and not in the least to the pious fraud that her own pity had contrived. It was a passionate luxury with her to outdo Aunt Cathie's raptures for the paragon of virtue and wisdom who had chosen her for his wife; and, as she spoke, the reticence which her queer modesty had imposed on her, was driven to the winds, so that her mind became a battlefield in which prudence and the instinct of self-preservation fought stiffly against the desire to proclaim her conquest; "This king among men," her heart cried; "he is mine, mine!' I am going to marry him."

"I am glad," said Aunt Cathie, "to see that you agree with me at last. I hope you'll realize now what kind of people you ought to rely on for advice. I don't want to be spiteful, Clare, or to appear to take pleasure in anyone else's misfortunes; but I have it on the very best authority, the postmaster's to be exact, that the Hingstons are ruined. Sir Joseph, I know, was managing director, and that makes it probable. I'm only thankful to think that your money and Steven's happens to be in Dudley's hands. You have to thank me for that. I made a point of it at

the time when your settlement was made. Think of it! But for that lucky chance you might be in the same boat as Lady Hingston!"

The look of disgust on Aunt Cathie's face and her pursed lips implied that under no possible contingency of marine disaster would she submit to sharing Lady Hingston's company.

"And, after all, my dear Clare," she reasoned, "nobody with any perceptions of rightness and decency can deny that it's a case of poetical justice. When you think of nice unpretentious people like Mrs. Willis of Mawne-I'm afraid they're in it too -who has just as much right to be ostentatious as the Hingstons, and would never dream of flaunting her furs in motor-cars all over this part of the country where people know her origins, like that woman, you realize the difference between natural gentility and . . . the other thing. You don't suppose, do you, that they imagine they're respected? All the country people—everyone who has any feeling for horses—despises them. I was only talking the other day to Ellen's father, the blacksmith. He was just as disgusted as any of us. 'They won't last, Miss Weir,'that's what he said. And he's right, Clare; simple though he be. the man has common-sense. Clogs to clogs: three generations, as the doctor always used to say."

8

MOBILIZATION OF STOURFORD

HOWEVER sound in theory Aunt Cathie's prognostications of the decline and fall of Stourford may have been, for the present that hostile power showed no signs of crumbling. It was true that the Hingston fortune, and, even more, the prestige

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attached to the Hingston tradition of good-luck, had been hard hit by the Sedgebury inundation; but other names—and notably that of Walter Willis of Mawne—had taken the blow more hardly, and Sir Joseph's determined conduct of the meeting at which his directors decided to cut sheir shareholders' losses, to abandon Furnival, and to close the pit, showed a courage that commanded confidence of itself.

During the month that followed Wilburn's proposal, which included such stirring incidents as the dispatching of poor Miss Pidgeon and all her silver to a sister in Somerset, the harrowing farewells of Steven to Bo-peep and her darling's departure to the preparatory school at Weston-in-Arden that Clare and Wilburn had chosen, and culminated in the announcement of their approaching marriage, Stourford possessed itself in an ominous immobility, like a volcano that sulks beneath the cloud of its last eruption; but early on the morning after Clare had posted the letter that revealed her plans, the new Lanchester, with the French chauffeur clutching the tiller in front, and Lady Hingston, erect as Boadicea, behind, came whizzing up the Uffdown drive like a chariot going into action, and, in another moment, as Mr. Styles told Ellen afterwards, "the fur was flying, and no mistake!"

Time had dealt as kindly with Lady Hingston as if, like everyone else, it was afraid of her. Now, in her fifty-seventh year, her spare, efficient figure seemed as potent, her eyes as keen, the delicate, almost childish texture of her admirable skin as clearly exquisite beneath the snowy toupet, as on the evening when Clare had first encountered her at Stourford, eleven years before. Only the network of wrinkles that radiated from the corners of her eyes, the fine, vertical puckers that marked her upper lip in repose, betrayed the loss of elasticity appropriate to her years. And now, as whenever she saw her, Clare's first

thought was: "How young, how pretty, she is!" But there was nothing pretty in the peregrine sweep with which her black eyes skimmed the breakfast-table.

"What, you've not finished yet?" she said. "At Stourford everybody has been up and working an hour ago."

"It's only—" Clare began. She stopped. The habitual excuse died on her lips. She knew that Lady Hingston hadn't risen with the lark—and poor Sir Joseph—to comment on her domestic arrangements; she knew that she was in for a fight.

This morning, for the first time in her life, her blood rose to meet it. Although her heart was plugging like a steamhammer, she felt that she was no longer afraid of Lady Hingston. The sensation was encouraging and frightening at once. In the old days, when Ralph was alive, she had kept the peace for his sake, acquiescing in the Stourford tradition of letting storms blow over; later, during the years of her widowhood, she had felt the disadvantage of her loneliness; but now, with the miraculous strength of Wilburn behind her, now that Steven, her precious hostage, was well out of range, now that Uffdown and all the impedimenta of the old life to which she clung no longer embarrassed her, she had a curious, brave feeling of being stripped for action, an inclination to test her own, incalculable strength. Flushed and made reckless by this access of courage, she faced Lady Hingston and waited for the attack. Lady Hingston also was waiting-for the butler to clear the pitch; she harried and embarrassed poor Styles until he fumblingly disappeared. Before the door had closed behind him she opened fire.

"I've read your letter, Clare," she began, then stopped, as if, at the mere mention of this enormity, defences must collapse. "And I can only say," she continued, "that words fail me."

If words failed Lady Hingston, Clare thought, the battle

was half won; unfortunately they did nothing of the sort.

"I think you must have taken leave of your senses," she went on, "even to dream of a marriage of this kind without consulting my husband and myself. I shall be glad if you'll tell me what you mean by it."

"I mean what I wrote, dear Lady Hingston. I'm going to marry Dudley Wilburn on Thursday week."

"On Thursday week? Ten days! You never mentioned anything of the sort. It seems you have committed yourself further than you told us."

"We shall be married very quietly by special licence. I didn't think, and I don't think now, that the date concerns you. Still, now I've told you, so you mustn't complain."

"Complain? I consider your conduct is monstrous, Clare; there's no other word for it. If you had breathed a word of this to me . . ."

"That's why I didn't, Lady Hingston; if I'd done that . . ."
"If you'd done that, we should soon have put a stop to this

nonsense."

"Oh no, you wouldn't," Clare told her. "You couldn't, you know."

"That depends entirely on whether you have any feelings of decency left in you. I suppose you still consider yourself a member of our family?"

"Why should I do so, Lady Hingston? You never come here except at times like this, when you want to manage me. We have very little in common except our name; and after Thursday week, we shan't even have that."

"I see you're making a joke of it. Of course, you're in a position, thanks to the money that Ralph left you in that iniquitous settlement that Dudley Wilburn was sharp enough to make him sign, to do without the name that he gave you. But

let me tell you this: without that name you wouldn't be lounging here in comfort over your breakfast at ten o'clock. Not a bit of it! You'd be earning your living in some third-rate girls' school, or starving over at Wychbury with that impertinent aunt of yours. Our name, indeed! I think it's time you realized what you owe to it and to us."

"To you, Lady Hingston? No, don't say that. To Ralph, if you like. If you had had your way he wouldn't have married me."

"I'm glad you admit it. In your sly way you're clever. If you want the truth, he married you because he was a fool and knew no better; and you married him, let me tell you, because you'd caught him and his money and knew better than to let him go. Don't think I didn't see through you and your blessed aunt. . . ."

"That's a lie, Lady Hingston, and you know it. I married Ralph because I loved him."

Lady Hingston laughed out loud: "Loved him! And now you show your love and respect for his memory by making another of these romantic love-matches! Of course it never occurred to you that Ralph was wealthy? Oh, no, not for a moment! And it's never occurred to you now that Dudley Wilburn is trustee to the estate, and that all Ralph's property will be in your hands and out of ours. Oh no, of course, it didn't! You're lucky, Clare, to find romance so extraordinarily convenient."

With the first mention of Ralph's name Clare's lip had trembled; her declaration of her love for him had brought her to a verge of tears; but the tears that now filled her eyes were tears of anger. She clasped her hands and wrung them, as if, by this gesture, she could master some part of her will that was slipping away from her. As she gazed at Lady Hingston,

speechless, Lady Hingston smiled, and, like the stimulus of a galvanic shock to a hysteric, that smile restored Clare to herself. She spoke calmly:

"You can say what you like about me; your lies don't affect me; but, Lady Hingston, if you are not content to leave Ralph's name out of this and to say no more of Dudley Wilburn, I shall have to ask you to leave this room. You can say what you like at Stourford, but I'm not going to listen to your abominable insinuations in my own house. I think you had better go. If you don't go, I shall."

She moved toward the door; Lady Hingston, seeing that she was determined, caught her as she passed. For the first time in their twelve years' acquaintance, possibly for the first time in history, she apologized.

"No, Clare, don't go," she pleaded. "My feelings got the better of me. I'm like that, you know. I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Clare turned and looked at her. A fine dew of perspiration was showing itself on the drawn white skin beneath Lady Hingston's eyelids and on the lips that nervously smiled at her. The black eyes faltered for an instant as they met hers; they were angry and puzzled, like those of a cat that clings to a wounded bird and will not let go.

"No, you're not sorry," Clare answered coldly; "that's not true either; you're not sorry a bit. What do you want to talk about? It's no use talking now. I suppose you want me to tell you something."

"How can I ask you, if you glare at me like that?" said

Lady Hingston pitifully.

"Well, I won't look at you," Clare sighed. "If you're not going, I wish you'd sit down."

Lady Hingston gratefully collapsed into a chair. They sat

down in silence for a moment. Then lightly, tactfully, as though she were merely changing the subject, she began:

"Where's Steven?"

"Steven? He went away to school a week ago."

"To school?" Lady Hingston gasped.

"Haven't you been worrying me to send him to school for the last six months? Well, Dudley and I went into the matter very seriously, and I think we've found the best place in the district. He's at Weston-in-Arden. I think he'll be happy there."

For a moment Lady Hingston wrestled with the impulse to be violent again and mastered it.

"Don't you think, Clare, that was a matter on which we might have been consulted?" she asked quietly.

"No, I'm afraid I don't. It had to be dealt with, and, candidly, I thought it would be better to get it over without outside interference. I'm tired of it."

"Interference is a strong word," said Lady Hingston, softly. "I see you're determined to cut yourselves off from us. I must say, considering Mr. Wilburn's very profitable connection with Wolverbury, that this strikes me as hardly politic on his part."

"You mean you'll get back on him? I expect he's thought of that. However, that's what we decided."

"You're very arrogant all of a sudden, Clare." The flush of anger came back into Lady Hingston's delicate cheeks; another outburst gathered and was dissipated. She spoke again, calmly; but the diamonds on her fingers glittered as she twined them.

"It hasn't struck you that Steven may be the loser by this
... obstinacy?"

"Not in the long run. It's no good threatening me."

"I wasn't threatening you, Clare. I'm merely suggesting what I've a right to suggest. Steven's our grandson; the only persons between him and the title are George and little Harold. Har-

old is delicate. If anything happened to him . . . You see? In a case of this kind we have to think ahead." She left the subject suddenly: "Where are you going to live?"

"In Alvaston, naturally."

"Then what will happen to Uffdown?"

"For the present we intend to let it."

"We? We? It seems to me that everything is 'we,'" Lady Hingston repeated impatiently.

"Why not? The house will eventually be Steven's. I am his

mother, and Dudley's his trustee. . . ."

"And Sir Joseph is his grandfather," Lady Hingston interrupted energetically, "and Stourford, now that you've decided to throw in your lot with Mr. Wilburn's, is his natural home. Your new life will be very different from the old one, Clare. Obviously, it's your duty to live where your husband lives," she continued with studied moderation, "but it seems to me unfair that Steven, a growing boy, should be handicapped by the fact that his stepfather lives in a town. Steven's birth, his position entitle him to more spacious surroundings. To be brought up in a suburb is a misfortune for any child-you must admit it -and, really, with all the new interests and friends you're bound to find in Alvaston, I shouldn't be at all surprised if you found it more convenient in every way to let him think of Stourford as his real home. In the holidays . . . " she hurried on precipitately, as though she knew that she would be interrupted, but before she could find another word Clare had risen and faced her with blazing eyes:

"So that's what you've been driving at, is it?" she cried. "That's the real reason why you came here to-day? You want to steal Steven from me, and make him your own?" She paused; all her fury was concentrated in a deadly deliberateness. "Listen, Lady Hingston. I'll tell you something. If I were starving

in the gutter and Steven crying with hunger, I'd die before I let you have him. And that's the answer that Ralph would have given you."

She turned her back on Lady Hingston, fearing that she could control her feelings no longer.

"I think you'd better go now," she said. "I've nothing more to say, so it's no good your staying."

Her voice wavered treacherously as she spoke. In the silence that followed she heard Lady Hingston's petticoats rustle with the sound of an offended turkey spreading its tail. Once, in the doorway, she turned, as though she were pulling herself together for a final salvo. Apparently, unless breath failed her, she thought better of it, for a moment later, the roar of the Lanchester's engine announced her retreat.

More shaken by this signal victory than by any of her previous reverses Clare took her fluttering heart into the solitude of Annabel Ombersley's drawing-room and cried until her emotion was exhausted. Half-an-hour later, when she stole up to her bedroom and bathed her eyes, she felt her spirit lightened as that of a bird that has escaped from a cage. The sense of freedom and relief was so embarrassing that she didn't know what to do with it; her body craved for space and movement in which to express this spiritual amplitude; so she put on her hat, determined to walk over the hills to Wychbury for lunch, and tell Aunt Cathie of her brave adventure. Aunt Cathie, too, would have read her news this morning.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, Sly, Steven's terrier, came bounding to meet her, scenting the prospect of a conducted rabbit-tour, leaping and sniffing and laughing in her face.

"Do you want to come with me, Sly, darling?" she said. She picked the trembling warm body up and cuddled it, for it was part of Steven. "Do you know what's happened, Sly?" she

laughed; and the creature snuffled its answer in her face. "Good dog, then, come along! Sly! Where's your master?"

But as soon as the door was open, Sly was off like a whirl-wind, skimming in widening circles over the dewy turf, barking and rolling and laughing back at Clare's own laughter. A soft, autumnal wind rustled the tree-tops; the fallen splendour of beech-leaves glowed along the vista of the drive. Behind her, sunlight mellowed and ripened the red brick of Uffdown, and, as she turned to gaze on it, the old house smiled. "Don't be afraid to leave me," it seemed to whisper; "I am old, I'm used to waiting; you are mine, I am yours, and some day, when you come back again, you'll find me here and just the same."

A thin tinkle swelled in her ears. Aunt Cathie's bicycle. Aunt Cathie herself, more flushed and breathless than ever, dismounting with a rush and folding her in her arms, while the bicycle fell with a crash on to the gravel.

"My dearest, I was coming over to lunch with you," Clare laughed through a blizzard of cold kisses.

"Lunch? I don't care if I never have lunch again," Aunt Cathie cried. "This is the proudest, the happiest, the most wonderful moment in my life, Clare darling."

With tears of joy streaking her wind-reddened cheeks, Aunt Cathie's heart sang its *Nunc Dimittis* to the golden sky, while Sly sniffed curiously at the tyres of the prostrate bicycle. "If only the doctor had lived to see this!" said Aunt Cathie.

And three days later, in a business envelope that bore the stamp of Wolverbury, Sir Joseph Hingston sent Clare a cheque. . . .

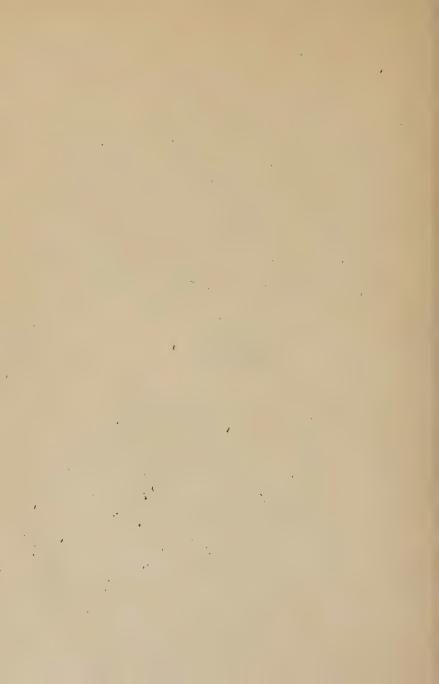


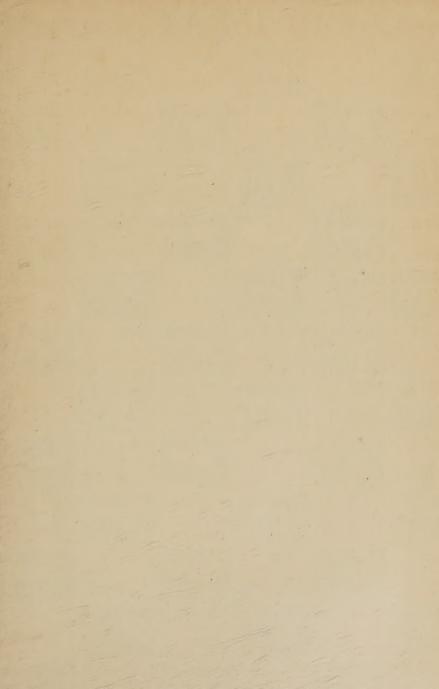
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The type in which this book has been set (on the Linotype) is based on the design of Caslon. It is generally conceded that William Caslon (1692–1766) brought the old-style letter to its highest perfection and while certain modifications have been introduced to meet changing printing conditions, the basic design of the Caslon letters has never been improved. The type selected for this book is a modern adaptation rather than an exact copy of the original Caslon. The principal difference to be noted is a slight shortening of the ascending and descending letters to accommodate a larger face on a given body-size.



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